

# interzone/45

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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

MARCH 1991

## 'The Bone Forest' by Robert Holdstock

Plus new  
stories by:  
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Geoffrey Landis  
Brian Stableford

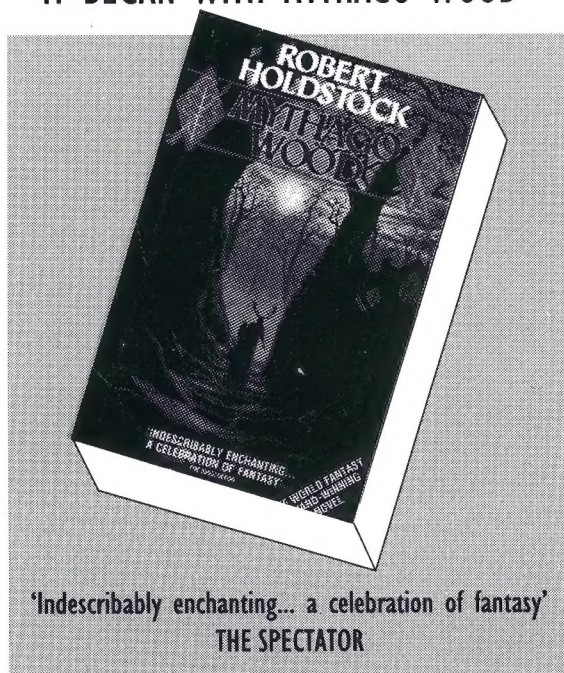
Ursula Le Guin  
interviewed

ISSN 0264-3596

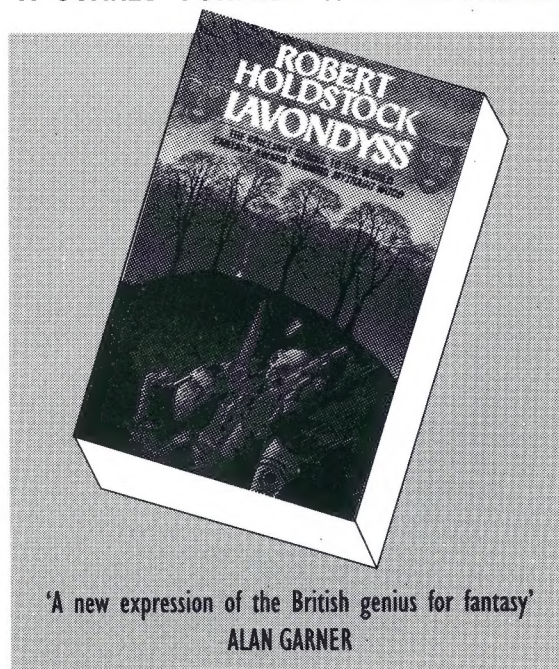




IT BEGAN WITH MYTHAGO WOOD

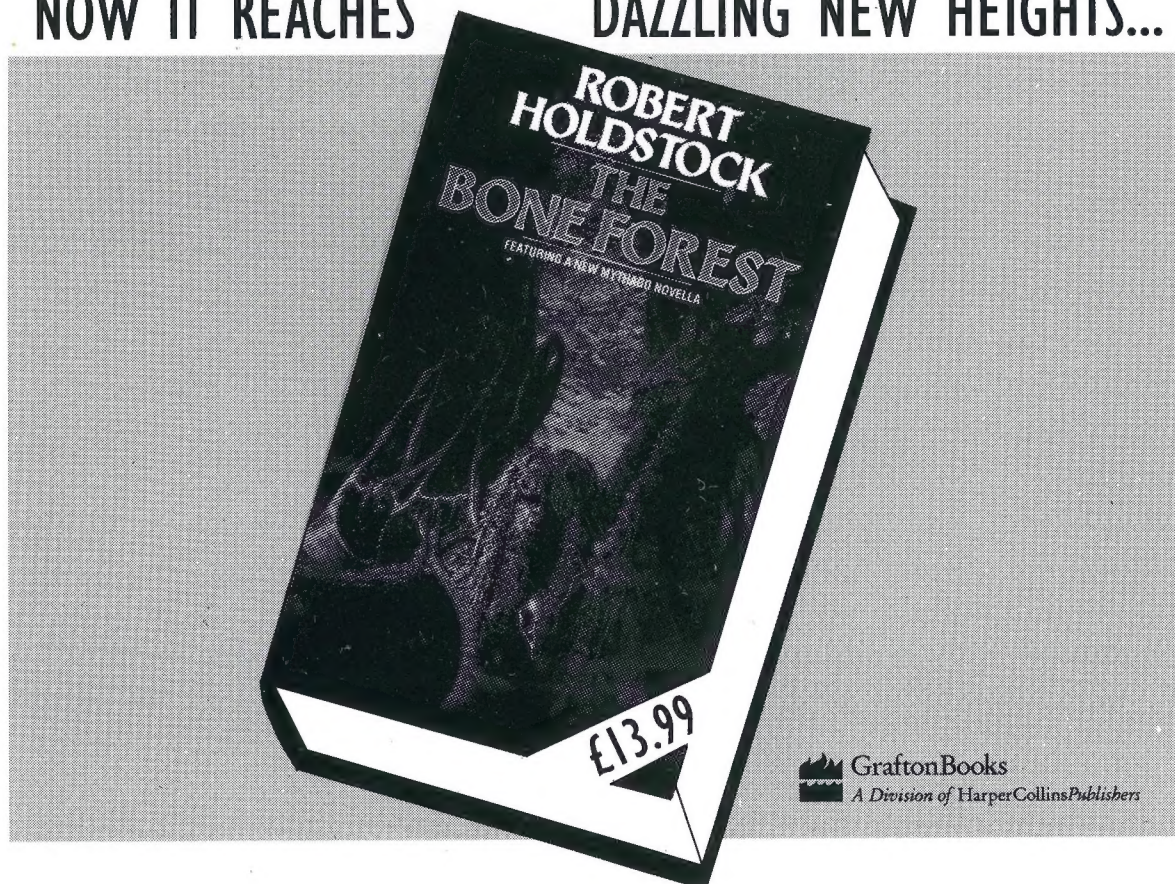


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# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 45

March 1991

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**Cover by Geoff Taylor** for "The Bone Forest,"  
courtesy of Grafton Books, Harper Collins Publishers

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# Interface

## David Pringle

We commence *Interzone*'s tenth year of publication with great pride in our achievements to date. In the past twelve months we've made a successful transition from bimonthly to monthly; and, casting back over the nine years that we've been going, there's little doubt that we have attained some of our original goals. We've succeeded in "bringing on" a number of new British sf writers, and we've provided a UK venue for many of the more established names. Almost nine years ago, some faint hearts said it couldn't be done; well, we have proven them wrong.

Yet there's no room for complacency: the magazine is still open to improvement in several ways (see my remarks about the need for more specialist staff, last issue); and, now that we're monthly and can afford to take occasional risks, we are keen to experiment. One such experiment is coming up the month after next. As some of you may have seen mentioned in *SF Chronicle*, *Locus* and elsewhere, we are undertaking a "swap" with the American magazine *Aboriginal SF*.

### INTERZONE/ABORIGINAL SWAP

This means that *Interzone* 47, cover-dated May 1991, will be a "special *Aboriginal* issue" with contents almost entirely provided by the US magazine. Simultaneously, *Aboriginal*'s readers will receive a "special *Interzone* issue" of their magazine, with fiction, articles, reviews and artwork selected by us. The contents of both these special issues will be reprinted the following month (i.e. the stories and articles that would have been in the normal *IZ* 47 will appear in *IZ* 48) so that no regular readers will lose out – the only persons who may have cause to complain are the few who already have subscriptions to both magazines; but, if they inform us of their identity, we shall gladly extend their sub by one issue in compensation.

Both issues will have strong line-ups of material (already, Charles Ryan of *Aboriginal* is promising us original stories by Harlan Ellison, Frederik Pohl and others). All contributors will have their work published twice, in the UK and the USA, and will be paid twice, at each magazine's normal rates. But above all the *Abo/IZ* swap should be fun for everybody involved, including the readerships of both

magazines – it's an exercise worth taking for its own sweet sake. More details next issue.

### OUR FIFTH ANTHOLOGY

Readers may have noticed that the cover painting on issue 44 (by Chris Moore) was ascribed to *Interzone: The 5th Anthology*, a book forthcoming in paperback from Hodder/New English Library. That volume was due to appear in February 1991, but unfortunately it has now been delayed to August. It will contain a selection of the best stories published in this magazine during 1989-90, along with two original pieces – by Barrington Bayley and Cherry Wilder.

### WORLD FANTASY AWARDS

The winners of the 1990 World Fantasy Awards were announced in November. They were as follows:

Best Novel: *Lyonesse: Madouc* by Jack Vance

Best Novella: "Great Work of Time" by John Crowley

Best Short Fiction: "The Illusionist" by Steven Millhauser

Best Collection: *Collected Stories* by Richard Matheson

Life Achievement Award: R.A. Lafferty

### DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

We were saddened to hear of the death of Donald A. Wollheim (1st October 1914 – 2nd November 1990), one of the great names in American science-fiction book publishing. As editor at Ace Books from the early 1950s up until 1971, Wollheim was responsible for publishing the first novels and short-story collections by an astonishing range of leading sf authors. Among them were Philip K. Dick, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Samuel R. Delany, Roger Zelazny, Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ and this year's World Fantasy Award winner, R.A. Lafferty. Wollheim then went on to establish his own publishing company, DAW Books, where he continued his editorial work in much the same vein (discovering C.J. Cherryh and many others) until illness forced him to retire a couple of years ago.

It should be added, from our perspective here in the UK, that Wollheim was also a friend and supporter of

many British sf and fantasy writers. He did more than any other American editor to establish the popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien. Among others whose first books he published were Barrington Bayley, John Brunner, A. Bertram Chandler, Tanith Lee and Brian Stableford. In the 1970s, he also republished many of Michael Moorcock's books, as well as endless series of hack novels by Kenneth Bulmer ("Alan Burt Akers") and E.C. Tubb. Despite his penchant for changing book titles (thus Stableford's *Watchgod's Cargo* became *To Challenge Chaos*), British science-fiction writers have much to thank him for.

### GORBACHEV IS A BRADBURY FAN

According to reports in *SF Chronicle* and *Locus*, Ray Bradbury (interviewed in *IZ* 43) has been invited to dinner at the Kremlin by Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev. Bradbury "first met Gorbachev at the White House, and learned that the Soviet leader is a fan who has read all his books," says *Locus*.

That explains it: it was Ray Bradbury, not Arthur C. Clarke, who "invented" Mikhail Gorbachev (see my remarks under Clarke's *Childhood's End* in this issue's "UK Books Received" column). I had a hunch that Gorby was an sf writer's creation, even if I was wrong initially to ascribe him to Clarke rather than Bradbury...

(David Pringle)

## BACK ISSUES

Back issues of *Interzone* are still readily available (except for issues 1, 5, 7 and 17). They cost £2.30 each inland (postage included), or £2.50 each overseas (USA: \$4). However, UK purchasers who buy three or more in one order may have them at £1.95 each (i.e. post free).



# Interaction

Dear Editors:

I don't know whether a male reader is supposed to comment on your all-female issue 42 (except on Colin Greenland's bit?), but I don't really care, because I enjoyed it. Sf written from a feminist perspective often does work well, mostly because of the new-view-of-the-world effect; in this issue, Lisa Tuttle and Martha Hood illustrated this, while Pat Murphy produced some nifty (post-feminist, post-modern?) irony, Carolyn Gilman played the modern-fantasy game as well as anyone, and Gwyneth Jones torpedoed the "first contact" theme to some effect, despite the stereotyped male characters in her story. I liked Judith Clute's interior art, too, although her cover wasn't to my taste.

Unfortunately, you didn't find any female writers to show that women can take on the men at their own "glossy technology" game and win; it's worrying to me that C.J. Cherryh still seems to stand alone in this. However, that's an absence which might be filled at any time; the real problem with issue 42 – the inevitable IZ nigger – was the presence of some tokens that maybe didn't deserve entry. China Mieville's letter, for example, was yet another attempt to force ill-fitting "mainstream" standards onto sf – to keep non-sf readers interested. I don't see why this is necessary (whether men or women argue for it).

Karen Joy Fowler's excerpt from her next novel was well-written and raised my interest, but it just didn't stand alone. I appreciate that this is a tricky subject, and I've no objections to *Interzone* considering extracts from long works, but the final effect here was that of a well-constructed advert.

The real pain of the issue, however, was Sherry Coldsmith's "Faking It." After I read this, I had to go back over it to make sure that it wasn't some kind of complicated satire; but no, it really was as silly as I thought – remarkably so, from a "name" writer. It started with a central sf idea that was vague, ill-defined, and implausible, *all* of the female characters were secretaries (including a heroine who was also artistic – expressing this through quilt-making), and all of the men were both macho pigs and techno-nerds (good trick, that). Finally, this farrago was given a near-future setting.

Perhaps, as a computer programmer, I'm biased. Perhaps men don't realize just how little they understand women. Perhaps, in the near future, women will still be just as oppressed as they are today. But there's one fact I'm sure of; women can be skilled technologists (I'm married to one).

And either a high-tech company that forever fails to recruit at least some female expertise is bucking the statistics, or it doesn't hope to last until the near future.

**Phil Masters**  
Baldock, Herts.

Dear Editors:

I read issue 42 with interest. Leaving aside Karen Joy Fowler's novel extract – because, who knows, something might have happened in a previous chapter, or be about to happen in a later one – the stories break down as follows.

Only one of the six is not about women, which is perhaps fair enough, though any male writer who used only male characters could expect some criticism.

Of the five which are about women: all are concerned in some way with the relations between women and men; three are concerned with the exploitation of women; in two a woman leaves husband or lover to begin a new life; in one a woman kills herself because she can't fall in love.

In two of the five there is a subsidiary theme: the suggestion of a visit by aliens who, whether they really exist or not, never actually appear, thereby avoiding the necessity for tedious descriptions of their appearance, attributes and thought processes.

Does this sound like an analysis of a collection of sf/fantasy stories? No, because it's not, it's an analysis of a collection of feminist writings. All writers are told, write about what you know. But, for sf/fantasy, that's not enough, you must also write about what you can imagine, and here we have, not imaginings, but extrapolations. Middle America, with more, more computers, more androids, more pollution.

I note, without further comment, your editorial remark, "women have fared disproportionately badly in our annual popularity polls."

**John Hall**  
Leeds

Dear Editors:

If I didn't have a subscription I would not have bought issue 42; your much heralded all-female edition is patronizing, sexist and counter-productive. No, I haven't read it yet – that's not the point and you know it. I may not bother anyway, on principle, but seeing as I – trusted you and – paid for it in advance...

Either a piece is good enough or it isn't. It matters not one jot whether it was written by a male person, a female person or a small green furry asexual person from the planet Zob. You shed very fashionable (and, I suspect, crocodile) tears over the lack of stories written by females then proceed to ghettoize them. And if you dared to

announce an all-male edition do you think there might be an outcry? Yes, I think so, perhaps just a little one.

And yes, I know that you have had all-male issues – you've carped on about it enough – but that was just because there weren't any good-enough stories submitted by females for a while, wasn't it? If a majority of submissions came to you from females, either for a brief period or over a longer term, I would fully expect you to publish, without fanfare, one or more all-female issues and I would be happy to buy and read them.

As for your issue 42 contributors, I pity them, for – if they were told of your plans for their work – they have presumably allowed what they no doubt see as righteous anger and frustration to overcome their better judgement. Or perhaps I presume too much. Perhaps they (and you?) would actually like to see Hugos awarded for Best Male Novel and Best Female Novel, for Best Male Short Story and Best Female Short Story. Or would it become Hugos and... Hildas? Hilda versus Hugo: *battle against the mind*. Oh dear, oh dear.

Light the blue touchpaper and. Stand. Well. Back.

**Steve Grover**  
East Kilbride

Dear Editors:

Your December issue (#42) was another fine one – it's nice to see that the quality of IZ hasn't dropped since you began to publish monthly. There were good stories and features in #42; I only wish I could have enjoyed them in a publication that did not bear the worlds "ALL-FEMALE ISSUE" across the fine cover.

I don't believe women and men are yet equal, but I do believe that pigeon-holing members of either group will do nothing to further the cause for equality. I do not like to read works by "female" authors; I do not like to read works by "male" authors. I like to read stories of quality and entertainment, and I think such stories would be served far better by receiving equitable publication. Instead, I feel as though the works in issue #42 were cordoned off from all other stories you have published; by such means are ghettos formed.

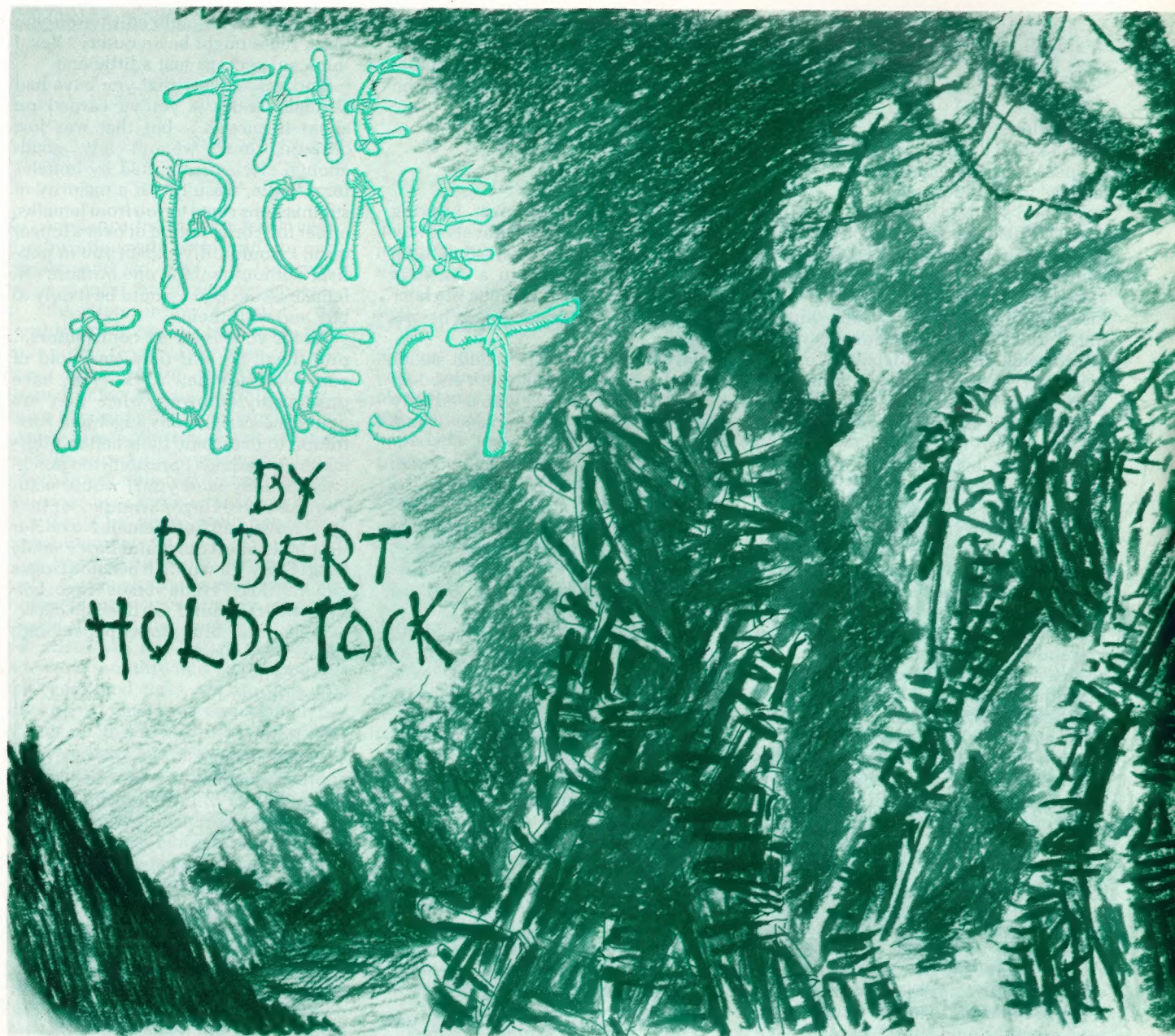
**Gordon Van Gelder**  
Associate Editor, St Martin's Press  
New York

**Editor:** so far, all complains about our "all-female issue" have come from men, not women. We'd like to point out that it was not particularly intended as a feminist issue – but simply an issue in which all the contributors happened to be female. What do women readers think?



# THE BONE FOREST

BY  
ROBERT  
HOLDSTOCK



*Time past and time future  
Allow but a little consciousness.*

T.S.Eliot

## ONE

**T**he sound of his sons' excited shouting woke Huxley abruptly at three in the morning. His breath frosting in the freezing room, he shivered his way into his dressing gown, tugged on slippers, and walked darkly and swiftly to the boys' room.

"What the devil - ?"

They were standing at the window, two small, excited shapes, their breath misting the glass. Steven turned and said excitedly, "A snow woman. In the garden. We saw a snow woman!"

Rubbing the glass for clarity, Huxley peered down at the thick snow that covered the lawn and gardens, and extended, without break, into the field and to the nearby wood. He could just see the fence, a thin dark line in the moongrey landscape. The night was still, heavy with the muffling silence of the snow. He could

see clearly enough that a set of deep tracks led from the gate, towards the house, then round to the side.

"What do you mean? A snow woman?"

"All white," Christian breathed. "She stopped and looked at us. She had a sack on her shoulder, like Father Christmas."

Huxley smiled and ruffled the boy's hair. "You think she's bringing presents?"

"Hope so," said Steven. In the dark room his eyes glittered. He had just turned eight years old, a precocious and energetic child, and Huxley was conscious of the extent to which he neglected the lad. Steven was forever soliciting instruction, or games, or walks, but there was so much to do, and Huxley rarely had time for frivolity.

The wood. There was so much to map. So much to discover...

He found the torch and went down to the back door, opening it wide (pushing against the drifted snow) and shining the beam across the silent yards. Steven huddled by him. His elder brother Christian had





returned to bed, cold, teeth chattering.

"What did she look like, this woman? Was she young? Old?"

"Not very old," Steven whispered. He was holding on to his father's dressing gown. "I think she was looking for somewhere to sleep. She was going towards the sheds."

"Dressed in white. Not very old. Carrying a bag. Did she wave at you?"

"She smiled. I think..."

By the light of the torch he could see the tracks. He listened hard but there was no sound. Nothing in the chicken hut was being disturbed. He closed the back door, looked out of the front, shining the torch around the wide drive and the garages.

Bolting the door closed he chased his son up to bed, then tucked himself down below the covers, taking ages to get the circulation back into his frozen hands and feet. Jennifer slept soundly next to him, a hunched, curled lump below the eiderdown.

Not even wild horses could wake her when the weather was as cold as this.

**4 January 1935**

What had woken the boys? Did she call to them? They say not. They were aware of her in some secret way. Steven, especially is attuned to the woodland. And it is he who has called this latest visitor from the edge "Snow Woman." It may be that she is nothing more than a traveller, using the shelter of Oak Lodge as she makes her way towards Shadoxhurst, or Grimley, one of the towns around. But I am increasingly aware that the wood sheds its mythagos in the night, and that they journey into the unreal world of our reality, before decaying and fading, like the leaf and woodland matter that they are. There have been too many glimpses of these creatures, and insufficient contact. But in the spring, with Wynne-Jones, I shall make the longest journey yet. If we can succeed in passing the Wolf Glen and entering more deeply, then with luck we should begin to make a firmer contact with the products of our own "mythago-genesis."

He closed the book and locked it with the small key he kept hidden in his desk, then stood and stretched, yawning fiercely as he tried to wake up a little more. A tall, lean man of forty five, he was inclined to stoop, especially when writing, and he suffered agonies of



back pain. He took little exercise, apart from the long treks into Ryhope Wood, and, as happened every winter, he was allowing himself to become unkempt. His hair was long, hanging over his collar slightly, and with its burden of grey in the oak brown, he was beginning to look older than he was, especially now that he had a winter's growth of grizzled beard (to be removed before he started teaching again, in a week's time).

The diary in which he had just written was not his regular journal, the scientific record of his discoveries and experiments with Wynne-Jones. This was a more private book in which he was keeping a log of "uncertainties." He didn't want Steven or Christian reading accounts of his study of them. Nor Jennifer. Nor did he want his dreams read, but the dreams he recorded, after visiting the wood, were sometimes so appalling that even he had difficulty in confronting them. These were private thoughts, a private record, for analysis in quieter times.

He kept this second log hidden behind the bookcase where his journals were shelved. He placed the book there now, then tugged on his wellington boots and overcoat. It was just after dawn, seven thirty or so, and he was aware of two things: the odd silence of the day outside (no clamour from the chicken house), and the second set of tracks through the snow.

These led back, almost in parallel with the first. He could see, now, as he followed them at a distance, that a coat or cloak had trailed between the prints. The right step dragged slightly, as if the woman had been limping.

At the gate, which opened to a track and then a field, there was a crush of snow where the visitor had climbed over and fallen, or struggled upright. Beyond the gate the tracks led down towards the winter wood, and Huxley stood there for a while, staring at the tall, black trees, and the dense infill of bright green holly. Even in winter Ryhope Wood was impossible to enter. Even in winter, it was not possible to see inwards more than fifty yards. Even in winter it could work its magic, and dissolve perception in an instant, spinning the visitor round and confusing him utterly.

*There was such wonder in there. So much to learn. So much to find. So much "legend" still living. He had only just begun!*

Steven appeared in the doorway, wrapped up warmly in muffler, school overcoat and boots. He sank in snow up to his knees and had to wade with great difficulty towards his father, his cheeks red, his face alive with pleasure.

"You're up early," Huxley called to his son. Steven bent down and scooped up a snowball. He flung it and missed, laughing, and Huxley thought about returning fire, but was too intrigued by what he might find in the chicken hut. He was aware of the look of disappointment on Steven's face, but blanked it.

Steven followed him at a distance.

There was no sound from the ramshackle chicken house. This was unnerving.

**W**hen he opened the door he smelled death at once, and half gagged. He was used to the smell of a fox-attacked hut, but often the scent of the fox itself was the odour that was most prominent. There was only the smell of raw meat,

now, and he stepped into the slaughterhouse and his mind failed to comprehend what he could see.

Whoever had been here had made a bed of the chickens. There had been twenty birds and they had been torn into fragments, and the fragments, featherside up, had been spread about to make a mattress.

The heads had been threaded onto a length of primitive flax, which was looped across the hut from one shelf to another.

A small patch of burning, with charred bones, told of the fire and the meal that "Snow Woman" had created for herself.

Expecting mayhem, finding such order in the slaughter, such ritual, Huxley backed out of the hut and closed the door, puzzled and perturbed. The sound of such slaughter should have been deafening. He had heard nothing. And yet he had lain awake for most of the night, after the boys had disturbed him.

The chickens had made no sound as they'd died, and the smoke from the fire had not reached the house.

Aware that Steven was standing by him, looking anxiously at the chicken house, Huxley led the boy away, hand on his shoulder.

"Are they all right?"

"A fox," Huxley said bluntly, and felt a moment's irritation as he realized that his tone was callous. "It's sad, but it happens."

Steven had not failed to understand the meaning of his father's words. He looked shocked and pained. "Are they all dead? Like in the story?"

"They're all dead. Old Foxy's got them all." Huxley rested a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder. "We'll go to the farm later and buy some more, shall we? I'm sorry, Steve. Who'd be a chicken, eh?"

The boy was disconsolate, but remained obedient, looking back over his shoulder, but stepping away through the snow at his father's urging, to walk down to the gate again.

There were tears in his son's eyes as Huxley rounded up a snowball and tossed it in a shallow curve. The snowball impacted on the lad's shoulder, and after a moment of sad blankness, Steven grinned, and threw a snowball back.

Christian was up at the bedroom window, banging on the glass, calling something that Huxley couldn't hear. Probably: wait for me!

It was then that Huxley found the "gift," if gift it was. It was by the gate, a piece of rough cloth wrapped around two inch-long twigs of wood and a yellowing bone from some small creature, a fox, perhaps a small dog. The pieces had holes bored through them. The package had sunk slightly into the snow, but he spotted it, rescued it, and opened it before the boy's fascinated gaze.

"She did leave you a present," Huxley said to his son. "Not much of one. But it must be a lucky charm. Do you think?"

"Don't know," Steven said, but he reached for the cloth and its contents and clutched them into his grasp, rubbing his fingers over the three objects. He looked more puzzled than disappointed. Huxley teased the gift back for one moment in order to examine the shards carefully. The wood looked like thorn, that smooth, thin bark. The bone was a neck vertebra.



"Look after these little things, won't you, Steve?"  
"Yes."

"I expect there's a magic word to say with them. It'll come to you suddenly..."

He straightened up and started to walk indoors. Jennifer appeared in the kitchen door, a sleepy, pretty figure, arms wrapped tightly around her against the cold. "What's all the activity?"

"That old Drummer Fox," said Steven gloomily. Jennifer woke up fast. "Oh no! A fox? Really?"

"Fraid so," Huxley said quietly. "Got the lot."

As Jennifer led the frozen boy inside to breakfast, Huxley turned again and watched Ryhope Wood. A sudden flight of crows, loud in the still air, drew his attention to the stand of holly close to the ruined gate where the sticklebrook entered the wood. This was his way into the deeper zones of the woodland, and he fancied he saw movement there, now, but it was too far away to be sure.

Two pieces of twig and a bone were small payment for twenty chickens. But whoever had been here, last night, had wanted Huxley to know that they had visited. There was, he felt, an unsubtle invitation in the shadowy encounter.

## TWO

Ryhope Wood is unquestionably a stand of *primordial forest*, a fragment of the wildwood which developed after the last Ice Age, and which – using a power which remains obscure – has erected its own defences against destruction. It is impossible to enter too far. I can at last penetrate further than the eerie glade in which a shrine to horses is to be found. I am not the only visitor to this site of worship, but of course my fellow "worshippers" come from inside the wood, from the zones and hidden world that I cannot reach.

I have coined the word *mythago* to describe these creatures of forgotten legend. This is from "myth imago," or the image of the myth. They are formed, these varied heroes of old, from the unheard, unseen communication between our common human unconscious and the vibrant, almost tangible sylvan mind of the wood itself. The wood watches, it listens, and it draws out our dreams...

After the thaw came a time of rain, a monotonous and seemingly endless downpour that lasted for days, and depressed not just the land around Oak Lodge, but the life within that land, so that everything moved slowly, and sullenly, and seemed devoid of spirit. But when the rain eased, when the last storm cloud passed away to the east, a fresh and vibrant spring set new colour to the wood and the fields, and as if coming out of hibernation, Edward Wynne-Jones made a new appearance on the scene, driving to the Huxley's from Oxford, and arriving in enthusiastic mood one afternoon in early April.

Wynne-Jones was also in his forties and lectured, and researched, in historical anthropology at Oxford University. He was a fussy man, with odd and irritating habits, the most obvious and annoying of which was his smoking of a prodigious pipe, a calabash that belched reeking smoke from its bowl, and did little to improve the aura around the smoker. With his weasel looks, a certain sourness of expression that Jennifer Huxley had at once taken against, and which did nothing to relax the children of the house, he seemed incongruous as he sat, puffing on the "billy," as it had been nicknamed by the Huxley boys, and holding forth in lecturer's tones about his ideas.

He caused a strain in Oak Lodge, and Huxley was always glad to be able to shunt his compatriot and valued fellow researcher in to the haven of the study, at the farther end of the house. Here, with the french windows opened, they could converse about mythagos, Ryhope wood, and the processes of the unconscious mind that were at work in the sylvan realm beyond the field.

A map was spread out over the desk, and Wynne-Jones pored over the details, stabbing with his pipe handle as he made points, brushing at the pencil covered paper. They had detected several "zones" in the wood, areas where the wood's character changed, where the dominant tree form was different and where the season felt different from that which existed on the outside of the stand. The Oak-Ash zone was particularly intriguing, and there was a Thorn Zone, a winding, spiralling forest of tangled black-thorn that ran close to a river, but which kept that water source hidden from view.

It would be Wynne-Jones' task, this trip, to try to break through the thorn and photograph the river.

Huxley would strike deeply into the wood from the Horse Shrine which both men had discovered two years before.

They assessed their route, and listed provisions necessary.

Then Huxley displayed the artefacts he had gathered over the winter months, while Wynne-Jones had been in Oxford.

"Not a great haul. These are the most recent," he indicated the wood and bone from the gate, "Left by the first mythago to actually enter the garden. She returned –"

"She?"

"The boys say it was a female figure. They called her Snow Woman. She slaughtered the chickens – in silence, I might add – stayed the night in the coop, then returned to the wood. I followed the trail: she had emerged and returned at the same point. I have no idea what her purpose was, unless it was to make a tentative contact."

"But nothing since?"

"Nothing."

"Do you have any sense of her status as a 'heroine'? What legend she represents?"

"None at all."

Other finds included a head-piece of rusted, battered iron, a circlet wound round with briar, the thorns trimmed on the inside, and a gorgeous, luxuriantly coloured amulet, the stones not precious, the metal work merely filigreed with gold on a bronze plate. But it was unlike anything that Huxley could find listed or depicted in the pages of his books of previous finds and ancient treasures. It had been suspended from the branch of a beech, two hundred yards inwards, just before the first barrier in the wood where orientation was affected. Wynne-Jones handled the amulet appreciatively.

"A talisman, I'd say. Magic."

"You think everything's a talisman," Huxley laughed. "But on this occasion I'm inclined to agree. But who would have worn this, do you think?"

He placed the cold, crushed circlet on his head. It fitted well, uncomfortably so and he removed it at once.



Wynne-Jones did not volunteer an opinion.

"And figures?" the younger man prompted after a while. "Encounters?"

"Apart from Snow Woman, and I didn't see her... just the Crow Ghost, as I call him... the feathers are mostly black, but I noticed this time that his face is painted and that he sings. I'm intrigued by that aspect of him. But he's just as aggressive as before, and so fast in his movement through the wood. So, the Crow Ghost. Who else... let me think... oh yes, the wretched 'Robin Hood' form, of course. This one seemed advanced, perhaps thirteenth century."

"Lincoln Green?" Wynne-Jones said.

"Mud brown, but with some fancy weavework on arms and breast. Slightly bearded. Very large in build. Took the usual shot at me, before merging –"

He placed a broken arrow on the table. The head was a thin point of steel, flanged. The shaft was ash, the flights goosefeather, no decoration. "The 'Hoods' and 'Green Jacks' worry me. They've already shot me once. One day one of them is going to strike me in the heart. And the way they just appear –"

He used the word "merge" deliberately. It was as if the forms of the Hunter – the Robin Hoods, or Jack o' the Greens – oozed from the trees, then slipped back into them, merging with the bark and the hardwood and becoming invisible. Too frightened to investigate further, because of the threat to his life, Huxley had no idea whether he was dealing with a phenomenon of the supernatural, or superb camouflage.

"And of the Urscumug?"

Huxley laughed dryly. But it was less of a joke, these days, more a fixation, a belief, bordering on the obsessive. The first hero, the primal form, ancient, probably malevolent. Huxley had heard references to it, found signs of it, but he could not get deeply enough into Ryhope Wood to come close to it – to see it. He was convinced it was there, however. Urscumug. The almost incomprehensible hero of the first spoken legends, held in the common unconscious of all humankind and almost certainly being generated in Ryhope Wood, somewhere in the glades of this primal, unspoiled stretch of forest.

The Urscumug. The beginning.

But Huxley was beginning to think that he was fated never to engage with it.

Standing by the open windows, watching the woodland across the neat garden, with its trimmed cherry trees and clipped hedges, He felt suddenly very old. It was a sensation that had begun to concern him: all his adult life he had felt like a man in his thirties, but it had been a vigorous feeling; now that he was in his middle forties he felt stooped, sagging, a fatigue that he had expected to encounter in his sixties, not for many many years. And it was a feeling of being too old to see, to see the wood for what it was, to see out of the corner of his eyes – those frustrating, tantalizing glimpses of movement, of creatures, of colour, of the ancient that hovered at peripheral vision, and which vanished when he turned towards them.

The boys, though. They seemed to see everything.

**"H**ave you brought the bridges?" Wynne-Jones unpacked the odd electrical equipment, the headsets with their terminals, wires and odd face-pieces that formed elec-

tric linkages across the brain. The voltage was low, but effective. After an hour of electrical stimulation, "peripheral view awareness" perked up remarkably. And it was in the peripheral vision that glimpses of mythagos were mainly to be experienced: Huxley called them the "pre-mythago" form, and imagined these to be gradually emerging memories of the past, the passage of memory from mind to wood.

Huxley picked up the apparatus. "We are old, Father Edward, we are too old. Oh God for youth again, for that far sight... The boys see so much. And so often with full fore-vision."

"What could they see if we enhanced them, I wonder?" Wynne-Jones said softly.

Huxley was alarmed. This was the second time that the Oxford man had suggested experimenting on Steven and Christian, and whilst the idea tantalized Huxley, he felt a strong, moral repulsion at the notion. "No. It wouldn't be fair."

"With their consent?"

"We may be damaging ourselves, Edward. I couldn't inflict that risk on my boys. Besides, Jennifer would have something to say about it. She'd forbid it outright."

"But with the boys' consent? Steven especially. You said he was a dreamer. You said he could call the wood."

"He doesn't know he's doing it. He dreams, yes. Neither boy knows what we know. They just know we go exploring, not that time runs differently, not that we encounter dangers. They don't even know about the mythagos. They think they see 'gypsies.' Tramps."

But Wynne-Jones wrestled with the idea of enhancing Steven's perception of the wood. "One experiment. One low voltage, high colour stimulation. It surely would do no harm..."

Huxley shook his head, staring hard at the other man. "It would be wrong. It's wrong to even think about it. Fascinating though the results would be, Edward... I must say no. Please don't insist any more. Set the equipment up for ourselves. We'll enter the wood the first moment after dawn."

"Very well."

"One other thing," Huxley added, as the scientist busied himself. "In case anything should ever happen to me – and I'm disturbed by being shot at by the Merry Man, the Hood figure – in case something unfortunate should occur, I keep a second journal. It's in a wall safe behind these books. You are the only other person who knows about it, and I shall trust you to secure it, should it become necessary, and to use it without revealing it. I don't want Jennifer to know what it contains."

"And what does it contain?"

"Things I can't account for. Dreams, feelings, experiences that seem less related to me than they do to..." he searched for appropriate words. "To the animal realm."

Huxley knew that he was frowning hard, and that his mood had become dark. Wynne-Jones sat quietly, watching his friend, clearly not comprehending the depth of despair and fear that Huxley was trying to impart without detail. He said only, "In the wood... in parts of the wood... I have been very disturbed... As if a more primordial aspect of my behaviour had been let out, dusted off, and set loose."



"Good God, man, you sound like that character of Stevenson's."

"Mr Hyde and Mr Jekyll?" Huxley laughed.

"Dr Jekyll, I believe."

"Whatever. I remember reading that whimsy at school. It had not occurred to me to see any connection, but yes, my dreams certainly reflect a more violent and instinctual creature than I am accustomed to greeting every morning in the shaving mirror."

"And these observations and records are in the second journal?"

"Yes. And accounts, too, of what the boys are experiencing. I really don't want them to know that I've been watching them. But if our idea about the mythago-genesis of heroes in the wood are right, then all of us in this house, even you, Edward, are having an effect upon the process. At any one time, the phenomena we witness might be the product of one of five minds. And then there are the farm hands, and the people at the Manor. Our moods, our personalities, shape the manifestations —"

"You've begun to agree with me, then. I made this point a year ago."

"I do agree with you. That Hood form...it was strange. It echoed a mind different to my own. Yes. I do agree with you. And this is an area we should study more assiduously, and more vigorously. So let's prepare."

"I shall say nothing about the second journal."

"I trust you."

"I still think we should talk about Steven, and enhancing his perception."

"If we talk about it, let's talk about it after this excursion."

"I agree."

Relieved, Huxley reached into his desk drawer for his watch, a small, brass-encased mechanism that showed date as well as time of day. "Let's get ourselves ready," he said, and Wynne-Jones grunted his agreement.

### THREE

"**Y**our son is watching you," Wynne-Jones said quietly, as they walked away from the house, still shivering in the crisp and fresh dawn. All around them the world was coming alive. The light was sharp to the east, and the wood was dark, shadowy, yet becoming distinct with that peculiar clarity which accompanies the first light of a new day.

Huxley stopped and shrugged his pack from his shoulders, turning to look back at the house.

Sure enough, Steven was pressed against the window of his bedroom, a small, anxious shape, mouthing words and waving.

Huxley stepped a few paces back, and cupped his ear. Chickens clattered close by, and the old dog growled and worried in the hedges. Rooks called loudly, and their flight, in and among the branches of Ryhope wood, made the day seem somehow more desolate and silent than it was.

Steven pulled the sash window up.

"Where are you going?" He called down, and Huxley said, "Exploring."

"Can I come?"

"Scientific research, Steve. We'll only be gone today."

"Take me with you?"

"I can't. I'm sorry, lad. I'll be back tonight and tell you all about it."

"Can't I come?"

The dawn seemed to lengthen, and the early spring cold made his breath frost as he stood and stared at the anxious, pale-faced boy in the window, high in the house. "I'll be back tonight. We have some readings to take, some mapping, some samples to take... I'll tell you all about it later."

"You went away for three days last time. We were worried..."

"One day only, Steve. Now be a good boy."

As he hefted his pack onto his back again, he saw Jennifer standing in the doorway, her face glistening with tears. "I'll be back tonight," he said to her.

"No you won't," she whispered, and turned into the house, closing the kitchen door behind her.

### FOUR

...poor Jennifer is already deeply depressed by my behaviour. Cannot explain it to her, though I dearly want to. Do not want the children involved in this, and it worries me that they have now twice seen a mythago. I have invented magic forest creatures — stories for them. Hope they will associate what they see with products of their own imaginations. But must be careful.

**T**here is a time before waking, an instant only, when the real and the unreal play games with the sleeper, when everything is right, yet nothing is real. In this moment of surfacing from the sleep of days, Huxley sensed the flow of water, and the passing of riders, the shouts and curses of a troop on the move, and the anguish and excitement of pursuit.

Something bigger than a man was moving through the wood, following the pack of men that ran before its lumbering assault.

And there was a woman, too, who came to the river, and touched her hand to the face of the sleeping/waking man. She dropped a twig and a bone on him, then left with a laugh and swirl of perfumed body, the sweat of her skin and her soul, sour and sexual in the nostrils of the recumbent form that slowly...

Came to waking...

Came alive again.

Huxley sat up and began to choke. He was frozen, and icy water ran from his face.

He was deafened by the sound of the river, and his sense of smell was offended by the stink of his own faeces, cool and firm, accumulated in the loose cotton of his underclothes.

"Dear God! What's happened to me...?"

He cleaned himself quickly, crouching in the river, gasping with the cold. From previous experience he knew to bring a change of clothing and he searched gratefully in his pack, now, finding the gardening trousers and a thick, cotton shirt.

He fumbled with shaking fingers for his watch and closed his eyes as he saw that it had been four days since he had reached this place, dazed and confused, and lain down on the shore with his head on his arms.

Four days asleep!

"Edward! Edward...?"

His voice, a loud, urgent cry, was lost in the rush and swirl of this river; he was about to shout again,



when the first piece of memory returned, and he realized that Wynne-Jones was long gone. They had parted days before, the Oxford man to find, if he could, the river beyond the thornwoods, Huxley himself to document the edges of the zones that were Ryhope Wood's first true level of defence.

How perverse, then, that Huxley should find himself by the expanded flow of the tiny sticklebrook. Had Wynne-Jones been here too? He could see no sign of the other man.

There were the ashes of a small fire, away from the water, in the shelter of a grey sarsen, whose mossy green stump seemed almost to thrust from the tangle of root and ragged earth. Huxley had seen enough failed fires, built by Wynne-Jones, to notice that this was not of the other man's making.

He gathered his things together. Starving, he wolfed down a bar of chocolate from his pack.

Memory raced back, and the disorientation resulting from his sudden waking after another of the long dreams began to fade.

He stared hard at the patch of thorn through which he had entered this place. He hardened, in his mind, the image of the woman who had caressed him as he slept in a half slumber, semi-aware of her presence, but unable to rise beyond the semi-conscious state. Not young, not old, filthy, sexual, warm... she had pressed her mouth to his and her tongue had been a sharp, wet presence against his own. Her laughter was low. Had he put a hand on her leg? He had the sensation of less than firm flesh, the broad smoothness of a thigh below his fingers and palm, but this might have been his dream.

Who, then, had the riders been? And that creature that had stalked them across the river?

"Urscumug," he murmured as he checked for spoor. There were no tracks, beyond the shallow imprint of an unshod horse.

"Urscumug...?"

He was not sure. He remembered a previous encounter...

The Urscumug has formed in my mind in the clearest form I have ever seen him... face smeared with white clay... hair a mass of stiff and spiky points... so old, this primary image, that he is fading from the human mind... Wynne-Jones thinks Urscumug may predate even the neolithic...

**H**e wanted his journal. He scrawled notes in the rough pad he carried with him, but the pad was wet, and writing was difficult. Around him the wood was vibrant, shifting, watching. He felt intensely ill at ease, and after a few minutes shrugged on the pack and began to retrace his steps, away from the river.

Half a day later he had reached the Wolf Glen, the shallow valley, with its open sky, where he and Wynne-Jones had separated five days before. This was an eerie place, with its smell of sharp pine, its constant, cool breeze, and the sound of wolves in the darkness. Huxley had seen the creatures several times, fleet shadows in the dense underbrush, rising onto their hind limbs to peer around, their faces half human, of course, for these creatures were no ordinary wolves.

They moved in threes, not in packs; and never – so far as he could see – in solitary. Their barking resolved

into language, though of course the language was incomprehensible to the Englishman. Huxley carried a pistol, and two flares, well wrapped in oilskin, but ready to be lit if the wolves came too close.

But in the three visits he had made to the Wolf Glen, the beasts had shown curiosity, irritation, and then a lack of interest. They had approached, gabbled at him, then slunk away, running half on hind limbs, to hunt beyond the edge of the conifer forest, beyond the low defining ridge of the Wolf Glen itself.

If Wynne-Jones had returned here he would have left the pre-arranged mark on one of the tall stones at the top of the Glen. No such mark was in evidence. Huxley used chalk to create his own message, gathered the necessary wood for a fire, later in the day, and went exploring.

At dusk, still Wynne-Jones had not returned. Huxley called for him, his voice echoing in the Glen, carrying on the wind. No hail or hello came back, and a night passed.

In the morning Huxley decided that he could wait no longer. He had no real idea of the passage of time, this far into Ryhope Wood, but imagined that he had now been absent the better part of a day and a night, longer than he had intended. He had a precise idea of how distorted time became as far in as the Horse Shrine, but he had never tested the relativity of these deeper zones. A sudden anguish made him strike hard along the poor trails, cutting through deep mossy dells, drawn always outwards to the edge.

It was always easier to leave the wood than to enter it.

He was exhausted by the time he reached the area of the Horse Shrine. He was hungry, too. He had brought insufficient supplies. And his hunger was peaked by the sudden smell of burning meat.

He dropped to a crouch, peering ahead through the tangle of briar and holly, seeking the clearing with its odd temple. There was movement there. Wynne-Jones, perhaps? Had his colleague come straight to this place, to wait for Huxley? Was he roasting him a pigeon, as he waited, with a flagon of chilled local cider to accompany it? Huxley smiled at himself, laughed at the way his baser drives began to fantasize for him. He walked cautiously through the trees, and peered into the glade.

Whoever had been there had heard him. They had backed away, hugging the shadows and the greenery on the opposite side. Huxley was sufficiently attuned to the sounds, smells and shifting of the wood to aware of the human-like presence that stared back at him.

Between them, close to the bizarre shrine, a fire burned and a bird, plucked and spitted, was blackening slowly.

## FIVE

The Horse Shrine, in its oak glade, is my main point of contact with the mythic creatures of the wood. The trees here are overpoweringly immense organisms, storm-damaged and twisted. The trunks are hollow, their bark overrun with massive ropes of ivy. Their huge, heavy branches reach out across the clearing and form a roof; when the sun is bright, and the summer is silent, to enter the glade is like entering a Cathedral. The greying bones of the odd statues that fill the shrine reflect the changing shades of green and are entrancing and enticing to the eye; the horse that is



central to the shrine seems to move; it is a massive structure, twice the height of a man, bones strapped together to form gigantic legs, fragments of skull shaped and wedged to create a monstrous head. It could be some dinosaur, reconstructed out of madness by an impressionist. Shapeless, but essentially manlike structures stand guard beside it, again, all long-bone and skull, lashed together with thick strips of leather, impaled by wood, some of which is returning to leaf. They seem to watch me as I crouch in the shifting, dancing luminosity of this eerie place.

Here I have seen human forms from the palaeolithic, the neolithic and the Age of Bronze. They come here and watch the greening of the spirit of the horse. To the earliest forms of Man, this silent respect is for a wild, untamed creature, a source of nourishment rather than burden. To later forms, it is a closer need that is reflected. Some visitors to the shrine leave brilliant trappings and harnessing, invocations to their primeval form of Epona, or Diana, or any other Goddess of the Steed. These I have collected. Many of them are fascinating.

I have watched and recorded many of these visitors, but failed to communicate with any of them. All this now changed as I encountered the woman. She was in the glade, tending a small fire, and staring up at the decaying statues. Alarmed by my sudden arrival, she stood and drew back into the edgewood, watching me. The sun was high, and she was drenched in shadow and green light, blending with the background. The fire crackled slightly, and on the still air I could smell not just burning wood, but the charred smell of some meat or other.

I waited cautiously, also within the scrub that lined the glade. Soon she re-emerged into the Cathedral, and crouched by the fire, spreading her skirts. She began to sing, rocking forwards in rhythm, prodding at the smouldering wood. She was very aware of me, glancing at me continually. I gained the impression that she was... disappointed. She frowned and shook her head.

Eventually she smiled, and there was an invitation to approach in that simple gesture. As I stepped through the tangled grass and fern of the glade, her lank hair fell forward. It was copper-hued, magnificent, but full of leaf-litter, nature's decoration. She occasionally pushed it back with her free hand, watching me through eyes that were enchanting. Her clothing was of wool, a skirt dyed a dull shade of brown, a faded green shawl. She wore a necklace of carved and painted shapes, bone talismans, I thought, and many of these were strikingly bright. Rolled beside her was a cloak, fur side hidden for a while. Then she unfurled the garment to fetch out a thin knife, and I saw white fur – fox fur, I think – and knew at once that this creature was the "Snow Woman" that the boys had seen last Christmas.

We sat in silence for a while. She cooked and picked at the small bird she had snared, a wood pigeon, I believe. Around us, the dense wood seemed alive with eyes, but this is the life of Ryhope Wood, the sylvan-awareness drawing out human dreams and fashioning forgotten memories into living organisms. When I am in the oak and ash zones, deeper than the Horse Shrine, I can often feel the presence of the wood in my unconscious mind; images at the edge of vision seem to slip past me: out of mind, into the forest, to become shaped, then no doubt to return to haunt me.

Was this woman one of my own mythagos, I wondered?

She carried an ash stick, and when she had finished eating she lay this across her lap before flicking earth onto the smouldering wood of her fire. She smiled at me. There was grease on her lips and she licked at it. Below the grime she was truly lovely, and her smile, and her laughter, were enchanting. I mentioned my name and she grasped what I was trying to do, referring to herself in some incomprehensible tongue. Then, seeing my puzzlement, she held up the stick and pointed to herself. She was called Ash, then, but this reference meant nothing to me.

Who or what was she? What aspect of legend was embodied here? By sign and smile, by gesture, by the tracing





of shapes in the air, by exaggerated communication with fingers, we began to understand each other. I showed her a rag effigy that I had gathered from near this shrine on the inward journey, and she stared at this bounty with puzzlement (at first) and then with an odd, searching look. When I dangled a bronze, leaf-like necklet – found by a stream – she touched the piece, then shook her head as if to say “don’t be so childish.” But when I showed her an ochre-painted amulet that I had found in the Horse Shrine itself, she exhaled sharply, looked at me with murderous, then pitying eyes. She would not touch the object and I ran it through my fingers, wondering what message reached from this crafted bone to the mind of the woman. The uneasiness lasted a little while, then – by sign – I asked her about herself.

She returned to me, a bird returning from a flight of fancy, a mind returning to the reality of a woodland glade. In a moment or two she seemed to understand that I was questioning her about her own history. She frowned, watching me as if wondering what to reveal. I noticed distinctly, but took no warning from the observation, that she looked afraid and angry suddenly.

Then, with the merest shrug, she reached into her rolled cloak and drew out two leather bags which she shook. One of them rattled, the sound of bone shards.

By gesture, she had made certain strange comments during the previous hour, and now she compounded my confusion. First she shook out the contents of the larger bag, dozens of short fragments of wood, strips of bark, some dark, some silver, some green, some mottled, all gouged with a small hole. I formed the idea that she had something, here, from every type of tree. With her eyes on the amulet that I had shown her, she picked out two of these pieces of wood, held them in her left hand. She sang something softly and the glade seemed to shiver. A coolish breeze whipped quickly through the foliage, then danced up and away; an elemental life-form, perhaps, summoned then dismissed.

From the second bag she poured out the bone, forty or fifty shards of ivory. From these she picked a single piece. Holding wood and bone in her hand she shook the three fragments, before threading a loop of thin, worn leather through the holes and passing the necklet to me. I accepted it, remembering, with no clear understanding, the gift she had left by the gate during the winter. I put the necklet on.

She sat back and replaced the rest of the wood and ivory into their respective bags. Then she stood and gathered her fox-fur cloak, and with a knowing smile, stepped out of the glade and into the silence and darkness of the forest. Her last gesture before departing was to rattle a tiny wrist-drum, a double sided cylinder of skin, beaten by small stones attached to thongs.

I had no idea what to do next. She had seemed to dismiss me, so I rose, intending to leave the glade and return to Oak Lodge.

## SIX

**H**uxley got no further than the first overpowering oak. As he ducked below its heavy branch, heading towards the narrow track outwards, his world – the wood itself – turned inside out!

From the warm and musty odour of summer, suddenly the air was sharp and autumnal. The light from the foliage was stark, brilliant; the drowsy green luminosity had gone. Trees, dense and dark, rose straight and bleak around him. These were birches, not oaks; thickets of holly shimmered in the lancing silver light. He stumbled through this unknown world, scratched and torn in his panic to orientate himself. Above him, birds screeched and took to wing. A cold wind swept through the upper branches. Unfamiliar smells struck at random, damp leaf mould, pungent vegetation, then the crystal sharp-

ness of autumn. The light from above was startling in its brightness, and if he glanced up, then looked around him, the trees showed as black pillars, without feature, without form.

He suddenly heard horses crashing through the forest, their lungs straining as they ran, their whinnying screams telling of the burden of pain and bruising inflicted by this tangled, ancient wood. Huxley glimpsed them as they struggled past, immense creatures, each impaled on its back with what he assumed quickly were the signs of taming: one carried flaring torches, spears with burning heads that had been stuck deeply through its thick skin; another was decorated with stems of corn or wheat; a third with tight bundles of greenery and thorn, blood seeping from where the sharpened stalks of some of these plants had been pushed too deep. The fourth carried in its flesh the slim, quivering shafts of a pale wood – ash perhaps – that were arrows, each trailing rags of the skin of creatures, the grey, white, brown and black of furry hides.

What had sounded like the frantic passage of a herd of these wonderful creatures was in fact the furious bolting of four horses only.

One came close enough to show Huxley the grey and bloodied hide of its flanks. This was the creature “decorated” with burning and smouldering torches. It towered over him, its mane full, flowing and lank; it reeked richly of dung. The horse turned briefly to stare at him and its eyes were filled with a feral panic. Huxley pressed himself against one of the great birches, which shuddered as the beast kicked at the trunk, turning to expose huge, cracked teeth that were the colour of summer-ripened wheat; it moved on, then, working its way inwards, escaping its tormentors.

The tormentors, following close behind the horses, were humans, of course. And Huxley was soon to realize what Ash had done.

There were four men, dark haired and heavily cloaked. They moved through the forest, uttering shrill cries, or gruff barks, or resonating song fragments that increased in pitch until they became an ululating echo. Sometimes they screeched words, but these were frightening and alien sounds. Each of the men wore his hair in a different, elaborate plaited style. Each was bedecked with stone or bone or shells or wood. Each had a colour on his face: red, green, yellow, blue. They passed by Huxley, sometimes running, sometimes laughing, all of them torn by thorn and holly, the leaf and wood impaling their crude clothing, so that they seemed no less than extensions of the birch and thorn forest itself.

Crying out and celebrating their vigorous pursuit of horses!

It was, Huxley chose to think at that moment, their way of controlling the horses. How many myths of the secret language of horses had come down to modern times, he wondered briefly? Many, he imagined, and here were men who knew those secrets! He was watching an early herding, the horses pushed into the tangle of the wood, the best way to trap them, in fact, a wonderful way to trap them, in a time before corrals or stables! Run the horse into the thicket, and the sheer difference in size between *chaser* and *chased* would have marked the difference between *eaten* and *eater*.



For he had no doubt at that moment – this being a pre-neolithic event – that these beasts were being herded for food, rather than as creatures of burden.

Striking at the underbrush with long, flint-edged sticks, the four men strode past. And the hindmost of them, looking as broad in his heavy furs as he was tall, turned suddenly to stare at the hooded intruder, green-grey light glittering in pale eyes. On his chest he wore an identical amulet to that which Huxley had found in the Horse Shrine. He touched it, almost nervously, a gesture of luck, perhaps, or courage.

His companions called to him, shrill sounds, almost musical in their rhythm and pitch, that sent birds whirring from the tree tops. He turned and was gone, consumed by the thickets of holly, and the confusing patterns of light and shade of the birchwood. Nervously, Huxley tugged the green hood of his oilskin lower over his face.

I followed, of course. Of course! I wished to see this ritual herding through to its final, awful conclusion. For I had now begun to imagine that a *sacrifice of horses* would be the outcome of the pursuit to which Ash, by her magic, had despatched me.

Yet, in substance I was wrong. It was not the oddly bedecked stallions that were sent on to the afterlife, encouraged there by flint and by flax rope. Not immediately, anyway. In the wide clearing, with its tall, crudely fashioned wood-gods, the horses were disturbed by the smells and the cries of extinguished life. The gathering of winter-clad men calmed the beasts. The glade in the birchwood echoed to the thumping of wood drums and the chanting of ancient hymns. There was laughter within the cacophany of sacrifice, and throughout all, the whooping cries of other herders, the music of magic, punctuating the confusion, serving to bring peace to the restless horses as they were held by their harnessings, and loaded with their first real burden.

Towards dusk, the horses were sent into the world again, running, slapped to encourage them, back along the broken tracks, towards the edge of the wood, wherever that lay. On their backs, tied firmly to cradles of wood, the horrific shapes of their pale riders watched the gloom, dulled eyes seeing darker worlds than even this darkening forest. The first to depart was a chalk-white corpse, grotesquely garrotted. Then a man, still living, swathed in thorns, screaming. After that, a ragged creature, stinking of blood and acrid smoke from the part-burned but newly skinned pelts that were wrapped around him.

Finally came a figure decked and dressed in rush and reed, so that only his arms were visible, extended on the crucifix-like frame that was tied about the giant horse. He was on fire; the blaze taking swiftly. Flame streamed into the night, shedding light and heat in eerie streamers as the great stallion rode in panic towards me.

I thought I had moved quickly enough to take avoiding action, but before I knew it the beast had collided with me, one front leg striking me a blow to the side, then its shoulder pitching me down. I curled up to protect myself, but my body seemed to disobey and struggled to stand...

For one eerie moment I sensed I was *behind* the flaming figure, feeling the heat on my body, the wind and fire on my face, the rough movement of the horse below me.

The illusion lasted a second only before I was pitched backwards again, stunned and disorientated as I lay on the ground, stifled as if hands were pressing down on my mouth, neck and lungs.

I recovered swiftly.

I cannot record the full detail of what I saw in that clearing – so much has faded from memory, perhaps because of the blow from the stampeding horse. I am still shocked by the nature of the sacrifices and the awareness that the murdered men seemed *willing participants* in this early form of

acknowledgement of the power of the horse.

Such wonderful creatures, and yet they would be both friend of Man and carrier of his destruction...

All of this was passing through my mind as a freezing night fell upon the *primaeval* world, and other thoughts too: by horse would come war, and plague, and the populations to overrun and overwhelm the food available from the land. By horse would come the fire that clears, and kills, and cleanses.

But this forest, this event, reflected something that had occurred *tens of thousands of years before the present!* Was I witnessing one of the first true intuitions of early human-kind? That the beast could be both friend and foe to a tribe that increasingly looked for control over nature itself? Sacrifice was made to new gods: the assuaging of fears. And it entertained me to think that later, much later, John the Divine would remember these early fears, and talk of the four horsemen, in fact describing his deep-rooted memories of an ancient understanding...

But with darkness came silence, and with the freezing silence of night came my helpless abandonment to sleep.

I awoke from the dream to the wet nuzzling of a dog. I was at the edge of Ryhope Wood – God alone knows how I had got there – in the scrub that overlooks the fields of the Manor House. The dog was a Springer, being walked by an alarmed and determined woman, who strode away from what she presumably believed to be a tramp. She called for her hound, which bounded after her, not without a regretful and hungry glance towards me.

## SEVEN

When he opened the back door to Oak Lodge, Jennifer screamed and dropped the mug of tea that she was holding. She looked at her husband through wide, frightened eyes, then collapsed back with relief against the table, laughing and brushing at the tea which had spilled over her dressing gown.

"I didn't realize you'd gone out again..."

Her words were meaningless, but he was too tired to think. He said, "I must look terrible. I should bath at once."

He was dog tired. He drank the fresh tea she made, and wolfed down a slice of buttered bread. Steven came and watched him as he undressed, stripping off his stinking clothes, drawing hot water from the tank to make a deep bath. Jennifer picked up the clothes, frowning as she watched her husband.

"Why did you put these on again?"

"Again? I don't know what you mean... I'm sorry... to have been away so long..."

He sank into the water, groaning and sighing with pleasure. Steven and Christian giggled on the landing outside. They had seen their father's naked body, something they had never witnessed before, and like all children this glimpse of the forbidden had amused and shocked them.

When he had washed himself, and dried off, he went to Jennifer and tried to explain. She was distant. He had already noted from the calendar that his absence, this time, had been two days. For himself, the passage of time had been much greater, but even so, Jennifer was rightly anguished, and had suffered an intense day of concern.

"I hadn't intended to be away so long."

She had made him breakfast. She sat opposite him at the table in the dining room, and leafed through *The Times*. "How could you get so dirty in so few hours?" she said, and he frowned as he forked slices



of sausage into his mouth. Her words were confusing, but he himself was confused, now. He was oddly disorientated.

When he went to his study he found that his desk drawer had been disturbed. Angry, he almost confronted Jennifer, but decided against it. The key to his private journal was lying on the desk top. And yet the last time he had written in the journal he had — he was sure — replaced the key carefully in its hidden position, pressed to the underside of the desk top.

He wrote an official entry in his research journal, and then fetched the personal diary from its hiding place, entering an account of his encounter with Ash. His hand shook and he had to make many corrections to the text. When he had finished he blotted the ink dry, sat back, and turned back through the journal's pages.

He read through what he had written shortly before the last trip with Wynne-Jones.

And he suddenly realized that there were six additional lines to the text!

Six lines that he had no recollection of writing at all. "Good God, who's been at my journal?"

Again, he stopped himself going to Jennifer, or confronting the boys, but he was shocked, truly shocked. He bent over the pages, his hands shaking as he ran a finger word by word along the entry.

It was in his own handwriting. There was no question of it. His own handwriting, or a brilliant forgery thereof.

The entry was simple, and had about it that haste with which he was familiar, the scrawled notes that he managed when his encounters were intense, his life hectic, and his need to be in the wood more important than his need to keep a careful record of his discoveries.

*She is not what she seems. Her name is Ash. Yes. You know that. It is a dark world for me. I will acknowledge terror. But there is*

*I cannot be sure*

*She is more dangerous, and she has done this. Edward is dead. No. Perhaps not. But it is a poss*

*The time with the horses. I can't be sure. Something was watching*

"I didn't write this. Dear God. Am I going mad. I didn't write this. Did I?"

Jennifer was reading and listening to the radio. He stood in the doorway, uncertain at first, his mind not clear. "Has anyone been to my desk?" he asked at length.

Jennifer looked up. "Apart from you yourself, no. Why?"

"Someone's tampered with my journal."

"What do you mean 'tampered' with it?"

"Written in it. Copying my own hand. Has anybody been here during my excursion?"

"Nobody. And I don't allow the boys into the study when you're not here. Perhaps you were sleepwalking last night."

Now her words began to fidget him. "How could I have done that? I didn't get home until dawn."

"You came home at midnight," she said, a smile touching her pale features. She closed the book, keeping a finger at the page. "You went out again before dawn."

"I didn't come back last night," Huxley whispered. "You must have been dreaming."

She was silent for a long time, her breathing shallow. She looked at him solemnly. The smile had vanished, replaced by an expression of sadness and weariness. "I wasn't dreaming. I was glad of you. I was in bed, quite asleep, when you woke me. I was disappointed to find you gone in the morning. I suppose I should have expected it..."

How long had he slept at the edge of the wood, before the woman and her dog had woken him? Had he indeed come home, unconscious, unaware, to spend an hour or two in bed, to write a confused and shattered message in his own journal, then to return to the woodland edge, to wait for dawn?

Suddenly alarmed, he began to wonder what other magic Ash had worked on him.

**W**here was Wynne-Jones? He had been gone over a week, now, and Huxley was increasingly disturbed, very concerned for his friend and fellow scientist. Each day he ventured as far into the wood as the Horse Shrine, seeking a sign of the man, seeking, too, for Ash, but she had disappeared. Four days after returning home Huxley trekked more deeply, through a mile or so of intensely silent oakwood, emerging in unfamiliar terrain, not at the Wolf Glen at all.

Panicked, feeling himself to be losing touch with his own frail perception of the wood, he returned to Oak Lodge. He had been gone nearly twenty hours by his own reckoning, but only five hours had passed in the house, and Jennifer and the boys were not at home. His wife, no doubt, was in Grimley, or had perhaps taken the car to Gloucester for the day.

So it startled him to enter his study through the locked main door and to see his french windows opened wide, and the cat nestling in his leather chair. He shooed the animal away from the room, and examined the doors. There was no sign of them having been forced. No footprints. No sign of disturbance in the room. The study door had been locked from the outside.

When he opened his desk drawer he recoiled with shock from the bloody, fresh bone that lay there, on top of his papers. The bone was in part charred, a joint of some medium sized animal, perhaps a pig, that had been partially cooked, so that raw and bleeding flesh remained at the bone itself. It was chewed, cracked and worried, as if a dog had been at it.

Gingerly, Huxley removed the offending item and placed it on a sheet of paper on the floor. The key to his private journal was not in its place, and shakily he fetched the opened book from its hole behind the shelves.

Bloody fingerprints accompanied the scrawled entry. This one was hastier than before, but unmistakably a copy of his own hand.

*A form of dreaming. Moments of lucidity, but am functioning in unconscious.*

*No sign of WJ. Time has interfered.*

*These entries seem so controlled, the others. No recollection of writing them. I have so little time, and feel tug of woodland. Have linked somehow with sylvan time, and everything is inverted.*



*So hungry. So little chance to eat. I am covered with the blood of a fawn, hunted by a mythago. I grabbed part of carcass. Ate with ferocious need.*

*Pangs strong. Flesh! Satiation! Blood is on fire, and night is a peaceful time, and I can emerge more strongly. But no way of entering those moments when I am clearly myself.*

*So controlled, the other entries. Cannot remember writing them.*

*I am a ghost in my own body.*

Huxley looked at his own hands, smelled the fingers. There was no blood in evidence, not under the nails, no sign of charcoal. He examined his clothes. There was mud on the trouser legs, but nothing that suggested he had torn and wrenched at a half cooked carcass. He ran his tongue around his teeth. He checked his pillow in the bedroom.

If he had written this entry, if he himself had come in to the study, in a moment of unconscious separation, eating the raw bone, he would surely have left some trace.

The words had an odd feel. It was if the writer genuinely believed that he was Huxley, and that Huxley's own entries in the journal were being made during times of unconscious calm. Reality, for the bloody-fingered journalist, was a time of "lucidity."

But Huxley, keeping a rational and clear mind now, was certain that two different men were entering notes in the private journal.

It astonished him, though, that the other writer knew about the key.

He picked up his pen and wrote:

Today I went in search of Wynne-Jones. I didn't sleep, and I am convinced that I remained alert and aware for the full twenty hours that I was away. I am concerned for Wynne-Jones. I fear he is lost, and it grieves me deeply to anticipate the fact that he might never return. In my absence, someone else is making entries in this journal. The entry above was not written by me. But I believe that whoever has entered this place believes himself to be George Huxley. You are not. But whoever you are, you should tell me more about yourself. And if you wish to know more about me, then simply ask. It would be preferable for you to show yourself, perhaps at the edgewood. I am quite used to strange encounters. We have much that we need to talk about.

## EIGHT

He had just finished writing when the car pulled into the drive. Doors slammed and he heard the sound of Jennifer's voice, and Steven's. Jennifer sounded angry.

She came into the house and a few seconds later he heard Steven go into the garden and run down to the gate. He stood from his desk and watched the boy, and was disturbed by the way his son glanced suddenly towards him, frowned, seemed to stifle back a tear or two, then went to hide among the sheds.

"Why do you neglect the boy so much? It wouldn't hurt you to talk to him once in a while."

Huxley was startled by Jennifer's calm, controlled, yet angry tones speaking to him from the entrance to his study. She was pale, her lips pinched, her eyes hollow with fatigue and irritation. She was dressed in a dark suit and had her hair tied back into a tight bun, exposing all of her narrow face.

She entered the room the moment he turned and crossed to the desk, opening the book that was there, touching the pens, shaking her head. When she saw the bone she grimaced and kicked at it.

"Another little trophy, George? Something to frame?"

"Why are you angry?"

"I'm not angry," she said wearily. "I'm upset. So's Steven."

"I don't understand why."

Her laugh was brief and sourly pointed. "Of course you don't. Well, think back, George. You must have said something to him this morning. I've never known the boy in such a state. I took him to Shadoxhurst, to the toy shop and the tea shop. But what he really wants —" She bit her lip in exasperation, letting the statement lie uncompleted.

Huxley sighed, scratching his face as he watched and listened to something that simply wasn't possible.

"What time was this?"

"What time was what?"

"That...that I said something to Steven, to upset the boy..."

"Mid-morning."

"Did you come and see me? Afterwards?"

"No."

"Why not? Why didn't you come and see me?"

"You'd left the study. You'd gone back to the woods, no doubt. A-hunting and adventuring... down in dingly dell..." Again she looked at the grim and bloody souvenir. "I was going to suggest tea, but I see you've eaten..."

Before he could speak further she had turned abruptly, taking off her suit jacket, and walked upstairs to freshen up.

"I wasn't here this morning," Huxley said quietly, turning back to the garden, and stepping out into the dying sunlight. "I wasn't here. So who was?"

Steven was sitting, slumped forward on the wall that bounded the rockery. He was reading a book, but hastily closed it when he heard his father approaching.

"Come to my study, Steve. There's something I want to show you."

The boy followed in silence, tucking the book into his school blazer. Huxley thought it might have been a penny-dreadful western, but decided not to pursue the matter.

"I went deep into Ryhope Wood this morning," he said, sitting down behind the desk and picking up his small pack. Steven stood on the other side, back to the window, hands by his sides. His face was a sad combination of uncertainty and distress, and Huxley felt like saying, "Cheer up, lad," but he refrained from doing so.

Instead he tipped out the small collection of oddities he had found at the Horse Shrine, and beyond: an iron torque, a small wooden idol, its face blank, its arms and legs just the stumps of twigs that had once grown from the central branch; a fragment of torn, green linen, found on a hawthorn bush.

Picking up the doll, Huxley said, "I've often seen these talisman dolls, but never touched them. They usually hang in the trees. This one was on the ground



and I felt it fair game."

"Who hangs them in the trees?" Steven asked softly, his eyes, now, registering interest rather than sadness.

Huxley came close to telling the boy a little about the mythogenetic processes occurring within the wood, and the life forms that existed there. Instead he fell back on the old standby. "Travelling folk. Tinkers. Romanies. Some of these bits and bobs might be years old, generations. All sorts of people have lived in and around the edge of our wood."

The boy stepped forward and tentatively picked up the wooden figure, holding it, turning it over, then grimly placing it down again.

Huxley said, "Did I upset you this morning?"

Oddly, the boy shook his head.

"But you came to the study. You saw me...?"

"I heard you shouting by the wood. I was frightened."

"Why were you frightened?"

"I thought...I thought someone was attacking you..."

"Was someone attacking me?"

The boy's gaze dropped. He fidgeted, biting his lip, then looked up again, and there was fear in his eyes.

"It's all right, Steven. Just tell me what you saw..."

"You were all grey and green. You were very angry..."

"What do you mean, I was all grey and green?"

"Funny colours, Like light on water. I couldn't see you properly. You were so fast. You were shouting. There was an awful smell of blood, like when Fonce kills the chickens."

Alphonsus Jeffries, the farm manager for the Manor. Steven had been taken round the farm several times, and had witnessed the natural life of the domestic animals, and their unnatural death with knife and cleaver.

"Where were you when you saw this, did you say?"

"By the woods..." Steven whispered. His lips trembled and tears filled his eyes. Huxley remained seated, leaning forward, holding his son's gaze hard and firm. "Grow up, boy. You've seen something very strange. I'm asking you about it. You want to be a scientist, don't you?" Steven hesitated, then nodded.

"Then tell me everything. You were by the woods..."

"I thought you called me."

"From the woods..."

"You called me."

"And then?"

"I went over the field and you were all grey and green. You ran past me. I was frightened. I could hardly see you. Just a little bit. You were all grey and green. I was frightened..."

"How fast did I pass you?"

"Daddy...? I'm frightened..."

"Be quiet, Steven. Stand still. Stop crying. How fast did I pass you?"

"Very fast. I couldn't see you."

"Faster than our car?"

"I think so. You ran up to here. I followed you and heard you shouting."

"What was I shouting?"

"Rude things." The boy squirmed beneath his father's gaze. "Rude things. About Mummy."

Stunned and sickened, Huxley bit back the question he longed to ask, stood up from his desk and walked past the wan-faced lad, into the garden.

*Rude things about Mummy...*

"How do you know the man you saw was me?" he murmured.

Steven ran past him, distressed and suddenly angry. The boy turned sharply, eyes blazing, but said nothing.

Huxley said, "Steven. The man you saw... whoever it was... it only looked like me. Do you understand that? It wasn't me at all. It only looked like me."

The answer was a growl, a shaking, feverish, feral growl, in which the words were dimly discernible from the furious face, the dark face of the boy as he backed slowly away, sinking into himself, lowering his body, eyes on his father. Angry.

"It... was... you... It... was... you..."

And then Steven had fled, running to the gate. He left the garden and crossed the field almost frantically, plunging into the nearby woods.

Huxley hesitated for a moment, half thinking that it would be better for the boy to calm down first before pursuing the matter further. But he was too intrigued by Steven's glimpse of the ghost.

He picked up one of Wynne-Jones' frontal-lobe bridges and trotted after his son.

## NINE

As I had imagined he would, the boy became intrigued when I told him about the frontal lobe bridges (I called them "electrical crowns"). He was hovering in the edgewoods, shaking, by the time I reached him. I have never seen Steven so distressed, not even after he and Christian glimpsed the Twigling, and were given a great fright. I said that WJ and myself had been experimenting on seeing ghosts more clearly. Would he like to try one on? Oh the delight! I felt smaller than the smallest creature in so tricking Steven, but by now there was an overwhelming compulsion in me to know who or what this "grey green figure" had been.

As we returned to the house Steven glanced backwards and frowned. Was it the figure? I could see wind stirring the trees and scrubby bush that borders the denser zones of the wood, but no sign of human life. Can you see anything, I asked the boy, but after a moment he shook his head.

We returned to the study and after a few minutes I tentatively placed a crown on Steven's head. He was trembling with excitement, poor little lad. I should have remembered WJ's instructions of two years ago, when first he had started to tinker with this electrical device. Always use with a calm mind. We had had our greatest successes under such conditions, perking up the peripheral vision, sharpening the focus of the pre-mythago forms that could be glimpsed when within the swell and grasp of the sylvan net. It was wrong of me to go ahead with Steven without first checking the notebooks. I have no excuse, just shame. The effect on the boy was devastating. I have learned a severe and sobering lesson.

## TEN

Steven remembers nothing of the incident with the frontal bridge. It is as if the electrical surge that sent him into such hysteria has blanked the last five days from him. His most recent memory is of school, on Tuesday. He remembers eating his lunch, and walking to a class, and then nothing. He is happy again, and the fever has died down. He didn't wake last night, and has no memory of the grey-green man. I walked with him by the edge of the wood, then ventured in through the gate, down by the thin stream with its slippery banks. Inside the wood I sensed the pre-mythagos at once and asked Steven what he could see.

His answer: Funny things.

He smiled as he said this. I questioned him further, but



that is all he would say. "Funny things." He looked quite blank when I asked him to look for the grey-green man.

I have destroyed something in him. I have warped him in some way. I am frightened by this since I do not understand even remotely what I have done. Wynne-Jones might know better, but he remains lost. And I cannot bring myself to explain in full just what I did to Steven. This act of cowardice will destroy me. But until I understand what has happened, who is writing in my journal, I must keep as free as possible of domestic difficulty. I am denying something in myself for the sake of a sanity that will collapse as soon as I am free of mystery. This is limbo!

Jennifer treats me harshly. I am spending as much time as I can with the two boys. But I must find Wynne-Jones. I must find out what has happened to bring this haunting upon myself.

## ELEVEN

**S**o tired he could hardly walk, Huxley walked across the night field, glad of a moonglow behind clouds that showed him the stark outline of Oak Lodge. Using this as a marker he stepped slowly towards his home, the sickness in his stomach still a jarring pain and a nauseous surge. Whatever he had eaten, he should have been more careful.

This excursion had been short, again, but he had hoped to have returned before nightfall. As it was, he imagined dawn was just an hour or so away.

The sound of Jennifer's cry stopped him in his tracks. He listened carefully, close to the gate, and again he heard her voice, a slightly strangled, then increasingly intense evocation of pain. She was gasping, he realized. The sound of her voice stopped quite suddenly, and then there was a laugh. The sound was eerily loud in the night, in the still night, this solitude of sound and sensation that was so close to dawn.

"Oh my God. Jennifer... Jennifer!"

He began to walk more swiftly. An image of his wife being attacked in the night was insisting its superiority over the obvious.

The doors of his study were shattered abruptly. Glass crashed and the doors flung wide. Something moved with incredible speed across the lawns, through the trees, causing leaves and apples to fall. Whatever it was stopped suddenly close to the hedges, then crashed through them, passing Huxley like a storm wind.

And stopped. And moved in the moonlight.

Grey-green man...?

There was nothing there. There was moon-shadow only. And yet Huxley could sense the outline of a man, a naked man, a man still hot from exertion, the smell of the man, the heat of the man, the pulse of heart and head, the shaking of the limbs of the man...

Grey green...

"Come back. Come and talk."

The garden was aflow with movement. Everything was bending, twisting, writhing in a wind that circled the motionless shadow. And the shadow moved, towards Huxley, then away, and there was no glimpse, no sight, no feeling of reality, just the sense of something that had watched him and had returned to the wood.

Huxley ran back to the broken gate, tripping on the shattered wood. He had not even heard the breaking of the gate, but he followed the wind with his ears and night vision, and saw the scrubwood thrash with life, then die again into the steadiness of night, as





whatever it was passed through it and beyond, into the timeless realm of the wood.

"Jennifer...oh no..."

She was not in the room. The bed was still warm, disturbed and dishevelled in an obvious way. He walked quickly out onto the landing, then downstairs again, following the slightest of sounds to the smallest of rooms. She was seated on the toilet, and pulled the door shut abruptly as he opened it.

"George! Please! A little privacy..."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm very all right. But I thought you were going to have a heart attack."

She laughed, then pulled the chain. When she emerged into the dark corridor she reached for him and put her arms around his neck. She seemed startled to discover him wearing his jacket. "You've not got dressed again! Good grief, George. There really is very little hope for you." She hesitated, half amused, half anguished. "Well...perhaps there's some hope..." Her sudden kiss was deep, moist and passionate.

Her breath was strong, a sexual smell.

"I'm going back to bed. I rather hoped you'd be there too..."

"I have to think."

In the darkness he couldn't see her face, but he sensed the smile, the weary smile. "Yes, George. Of course. You go and think. Write in your journal." She walked away from him, towards the stairs. "There are fresh bones in the pantry should you get peckish."

But her voice gave away her sadness. He heard the moment's crying, and intuited instantly and painfully that something she had thought renewed she now realized was not.

So he had been here again. The encounter in the garden, in the darkness...that had been the grey-green man. And he had seduced Jennifer!

Huxley drew the journal from its hiding place, and with shaking hands opened it, switching on the lamp.

*The same? You and I? No. No! It feels wrong. I am no ghost.*

*Am I a ghost? Perhaps. Yes. When I read your words. Yes. Perhaps right.*

*I am confused. I live in brief moments, and the dreams are strong and powerful. I am dreaming a life. But I belong in Oak Lodge. When I am there I feel warmth. But the wood pulls me back. You are right. You other writer. I am your dream and I am free, but not free. Oh confused! And ill. Always so ill. The blood is so hot.*

*The dreams, the urging. I am such a hunter. I run them down and use my hands. I am plastered with detritus from the forest.*

*My son Steven. You have tampered with my son. This was wrong. Such fury in me. If I see you I fear to control my anger. Leave Steven alone. I am aware of him in the wood. He is here. Something has, or will happen, and he is everywhere. Something will happen to him. Do not interfere with him. An immense event is shaping around him, not yet happened, but already changing the wood, and time is recoiling and refashioning. I watch seasons in frantic change, in full, seconds-long flight. I hear sounds from all times. This is Ash's doing.*

*The horses, the time of horses. Something happened there, something small. Something to you/me to cause this you/me, this wild split. What happened? I see it only in dreams. I am too wild, too base, when I am free of dreams I am wild and running, the merest scent of blood is an enragement, the scent of flesh sends me surging, Jennifer is not safe from me, guard her guard her, even though you recognize that passion Find Ash and find where she sent you. Why did she send you there? The horse, the fire in that wood. All a dream*

*Guard Jennifer from the ghost and the bloody obsessions of the ghost*

*I am so close to this earth, so much matter of rock and wood and silent night that lives, claws, crawls, devours, desires, surges and comes into all life that interferes and crosses paths and tracks*

*Kill me?*

*How?*

*Join again, return me to you. Ash. The key. The wood is tugging, a root around me. It draws me tight. The smell of must and rotten wood. The stink. Each a chain around me. Each a tug. I am a prisoner*

*Steven will be lost to us. He will never*

But with this tantalizing and terrifying half-sentence, the entry ended.

## TWELVE

What had happened in that living dream of the cold wood, and the running horses? He had been run down by one of the creatures. He had tried to see the face of the corpse on its back, but had failed. He had, when he thought about it clearly, felt himself torn spiritually apart: there had been that moment of wild riding, of moving with horse and cadaver through the trees...

Had that been the moment of division?

Had that been when the green-grey man had split from him?

He wrote in his journal:

To my shadow: What do you know of Ash? What do you remember of the moment when the horse collided with you in the birchwood glade? How shall I contact Ash again? Why do you think Wynne-Jones is dead? Why do you think Steven will be lost? What is the great event that you feel forming? Is there any way that we can talk? Or must we continue to correspond through the pages of this journal?

He placed the book behind the shelves, then went out into the rising dawn. Wisps of what looked like smoke, funnels of greyish smog, rose from over Ryhope Wood. As the light increased, the odd vortices vanished. The last thing he saw before returning to the house was the shimmering movement of leaves and green, running, it seemed, for several yards along the edgewood. He could not quite focus upon it, although the sensation of movement was strongest when he looked away, catching it from the corner of his eye.

The new day was a Saturday and both boys were at home. By mid-morning the sound of their antics and play had begun to irritate Huxley as he tried to concentrate his mind – his tired mind – on thinking through the experience with Ash. He



watched the boys from his study window. Christian, the more rumbustious of the two, was swinging from every branch he could find during a game of some form of chase. Steven seemed to become aware of his father, watching him, and froze for a moment, his face anxious. Only when Huxley moved away did he hear the sound of the game restart.

They are both afraid of me. No: they are both missing closeness with me. They hear their friends talk about fathers... they think of their father... I feel so helpless. I am not interested in them as boys, only in the men, the minds, the thoughts and explorations of deeper thought that they will become... they bore me...

The moment he had written these lines, he inked them through, so strongly, so savagely, that none would ever read this terrible and sickening moment of self honesty.

No. I am envious of them. They "see" in a way that is beyond my ability. Their fantasy games include glimpses of pre-mythago forms that I would give anything to witness. They are attuned more deeply to the wood. I hear it in their stories, their fantasies, their games. But if they were too aware of what was happening to them... might that not diminish their spontaneous "seeing"? These thoughts seem irrational, and yet I feel that they must be kept in ignorance for their talents to be pure.

**L**ater in the day the boys left the garden. The sudden cessation of their noise attracted Huxley and when he went to see where they'd gone he noticed them, distantly, tearing round the edge of the wood, in the direction of the railway tracks.

He knew where they'd be going, and out of curiosity followed them, taking his stick and his panama hat. The day was bright, if not hot, and there was a brisk, moist-smelling breeze, heralding rain later.

They had gone to the mill pond, of course. Christian was sitting on the old jetty, where the boat had once been tethered. The pond was wide, curving round between dense, overhanging trees, to end in a sprawling patch of rushes out of sight. The oaks at that far end were like a solid wall, great thick trunks, the spaces between them a clutter of willow and spreading holly. It was as if the wall had been deliberately built to stop the wood being entered at that point.

Once, there had been fish in abundance in this pool, but at some time in the twenties the life had faded. A pike or two still could be seen, gliding below the water. But there was little point in fishing, now, and the old boat was rapidly rotting.

Huxley had warned both boys never to take that boat out, but he could see that Christian was contemplating such an act, as he dangled his feet in the water. Such a headstrong boy. So wilful.

Steven was beating through the reeds with a stick. No, not beating: cutting. He gathered a thick armful and carried them back around the pond's edge, and Huxley drew back into the concealing undergrowth.

The exchange of conversation between his sons confirmed that they were planning to make a reed boat, and float it on the pond.

He smiled, and was about to withdraw and walk silently back along the short path that led from open land to this pond, when he realized that the boys were alarmed.

Christian was running over the decaying piles of the boathouse, pointing into the thick woods. Steven followed him, and they dropped to a crouch, peering into the gloom.

From his lurking place, Huxley followed the direction of their interest. He realized that a wide, strange face was watching from high in the branches of a tree. He was reminded of the Cheshire Cat from Alice, and smiled. But the face wasn't smiling.

It withdrew abruptly from the light. Something crashed noisily to the ground, startling and scattering birds from the tree tops. It moved with great speed through the woodland, round the pondside, was silent for a moment, then crashed noisily into the deep wood, finally vanishing from earshot.

Huxley remained where he was. The excited lads passed by him, talking about the "monkey face," and sharing the burden of reeds for the hull of their reed ship, which they intended to build in the woodshed. As soon as they were gone Huxley went round to the boathouse, and struck into the tangle of undergrowth behind. There was no path, and his trousers were snagged and torn by the screen of briar rose and blackberry bramble. He found that the simple barrier of this untamed wood would not allow him in, but after a while he found a patch of nettles, stamped them down, laid his jacket over them, and sat, screened from sight, surrounded by the heavy silence and air of the wood, watching through the shifting light for any further sign of "monkey face," a mythago that he had not yet observed himself at quarters close enough for him to make a judgement upon its mythological nature.

**I**t was a fruitless wait, and he returned to Oak Lodge a disappointed man. There were no further entries in his private journal, and he made a short entry in his research journal, defining the mythago as far as he was able. He asked Steven and Christian about their day, and teased their perception of the creature from them, affecting idle interest. But neither boy could add more to what he himself had seen, save to say that the face was wide, high-browed and painted. It was perhaps, then, an early manifestation of Cro-Magnon belief? Its appearance was too modern for it to be associated with the culture that had given rise to the man from Piltdown, the nature of whose belief systems constantly exercised Huxley's imagination and interest.

**A**t eleven o'clock Jennifer announced that she was retiring for the night, and as she walked past him paused, held out her hand. "Are you coming?"

It horrified Huxley to feel such shock, such fear of accepting his wife's invitation. A cold sweat tingled on his neck and hairline, and he said casually, "I do need to read a little further."

"I see," she breathed with resignation, and went to bed.

How could he feel like this? He noticed that his hands were shaking. The intimacy that had characterized their first years together more by its regularity than its passion, had certainly, in recent years, changed to a self-conscious routine of tentative suggestion, almost unknowing touch, and brief



encounter by darkness. And yet he had accepted this change for the worse – it always occurred to him that Jennifer might have been accepting the status with far less complacency – without really conscious thought. It had taken the sound of her pleasure to remind him of their early years, and to make him aware, now, of the avoidance that he had been practising.

He nearly cried as he thought of how much he had denied the closeness of their life that Jennifer so needed.

He stared hard at the ceiling, thinking of her in bed, thinking of holding her. And gradually he forced himself to his feet, and walked upstairs, and entered the bedroom where she slept softly, half exposed from below the summer sheet, her body faintly illuminated by moonlight from the bright summer night.

She was naked, he realized, and the shock made him catch his breath. He was almost embarrassed to look at her, at the leg that lay outside the covers, the soft breast that was crushed in the bend of her arm, as she slept, her head turned half towards him.

He undressed and pulled on pyjamas. In bed beside her he watched her for a long time, long enough to bite all skin from the inside of his lower lip, so that he tasted blood, and his lip was sore.

He almost woke her once, his hand out to her, the fingers hovering just above her tousled hair.

But he didn't. He closed his eyes, sank a little lower, and thought of the primal mythological form of humankind, his great quest: The Urscumug...

*Somewhere in the woods, the creature lives. It must have formed many times. But it is deep. It is in the heart. How to find it? How to find? I must devise a way of calling it to the edge...*

He was still thinking about his quest when he heard the sound of movement downstairs. It startled him at first, but then he lay quietly, listening hard.

Yes. It was in the study. There was a long time of silence, then again the sound of furniture being moved, drawers opened, cabinets opened as perhaps his souvenirs were examined.

Then a sudden sound on the stairs, someone coming up the stairs at great speed.

Again, silence.

It was on the landing. It moved along the landing to the door of the bedroom and again stopped; then the door was opened and something sped into the room, a fleet shadow crossing the floor to the window in an instant, and closing the curtains. A deeper darkness descended, but in the moment of dim light Huxley had seen the man shape, the deep shadow shape that was unquestionably a naked human male. The shoulders were broad, the body hard and lean, and the creature's member was distended and almost vertical. A strong odour filled the room, something of undergrowth, something of the sharp smell of an unwashed man.

Slowly Huxley sat up in bed. He sensed the movement of the figure, short darting movements that carried it from one side of the room to the other, then back again.

*It was waiting for him to go!*

In its last journal entry it had written "protect Jennifer against me. Protect her against the ghost..."

"Go away," Huxley breathed. "I won't let you come near her. You told me not to..."

It raced up to him in the darkness and hovered there, its eyes dimly reflecting, showing how wide they were, how intense. It was hard to define shape; he sensed shadows shifting, a depthlessness to the figure, but yet it was solid. The heat and the smell that came off it were overpowering.

In a voice that sounded like the restless stirring of a breeze, it whispered "Journal."

It had written in the journal!

It towered over him, and Jennifer suddenly stirred. "George...?"

She tossed her head slightly, and her arm extended towards him, but before the hand could touch him it was intercepted. The creature had her, and Huxley felt willed to leave the bed.

"Journal," breathed the grey-green man, and there was the hint of a laugh, of a smile as the word was said for the second time.

"George?" Jennifer murmured, coming more awake.

His heart pounding, the sense of the grey-green man's mocking laughter teasing at his conscience, Huxley swung out of bed and left the room.

Half way down the stairs he heard Jennifer's cry of surprise as she woke fully. Then her sudden, splendid laugh.

He blocked his ears against the sounds that came next, and went into his study, tears streaming down his face as he fumbled behind the books for his private journal.

### THIRTEEN

*Will try to speak. But you move slowly, ghostly. Perhaps I am the same to you. I observe the house and Jenny, the boys, and they are real, although they seem to be a dream. But you are slow, the me part, the me factor, too ghostly, and it is hard to speak.*

*Steven is in the wood, Chris too. Something huge in the wood, some event, some rebirth or regeneration. I sense it. I hear it from mouths, from tales. I have been here so long, and the world of the mythago is my world.*

*This is puzzling. Why have you not been in the wood, in the same way, in the same wood? Confused. My mind does not focus. But I have had encounters. You have not had the same encounters.*

*I can't answer about Steven. As a man, he will come here. Or as a boy and grow to a man. Somehow. It has to do with the Urscumaga. Pursuit. Quest. I can't say more. I know NO more! Be gentle with Steven. Be careful of him. Be watchful. Love him. LOVE HIM!*

*Wynne-Jones was in the horse temple. You saw him. You MUST have seen. I think he was killed. He was trapped.*

*You should know this. Why not? Why do you not?*

*Perhaps you have forgotten. Perhaps some memory is stripped from you and exists in me. Memory in you is denied me. No. Not true. Your account of Ash is my account. Almost. You describe the amulet as dull. The amulet was bright. You say a green stone. Yes. You say a leather thong. No. Horse hair. Twined horse hair. Can you have made such a mistake?*

*I see now that you make no mention of Ash previously. Not my journal then, though so many entries are the same. Yes. Snow Woman, Steven's word, was the same as Ash. I remember her visit, that winter. But Wynne-Jones made contact in February. No mention*



in the journal of that. But I wrote an account. He understood the basic nature of Ash. But no mention in either journal. Yet it was written.

Are we the same?

Ash: She carries the memory of wood. She is the guardian of ancient forest and can summon from them and send to them. She uses the techniques of the shaman to do this. By casting her charms of wood and bone she can create – and destroy, too, if she wishes – forests of lime and spruce, or oak and ash, or alder and beech. She can send hunters to find pigs, or stags, or bears, or horses. Other things! Forgotten creatures. Forgotten woods. Her skills are legion. She can send the curious to find curiosities. She can even send a stealer of talismans to find... well, what can I say to you? To find a little humility, perhaps. I am certain that she was telling me to leave alone things I did not understand.

The hunters of the land have always believed in her, knowing that she can control all the woods of the world. In her mind, and in her skills, forests are waiting to be born, ancient forests are waiting for the return of the hunters. Through Ash there is a strange continuity. No matter what has been destroyed, it lives in her, and one day can be summoned back.

She sent us to the horse sacrifice for a reason.

We must ask: what reason?

I was riding the horse when it collided with the hooded man. I remember nearly falling. The horse was bolting. It had two bodies on its back. One alive (me) beginning to burn badly. One dead. The hooded man was struck. I fell, the horse ran on. Then I came home. But I am a ghost.

Find Ash! Return us to the horses! Something happened!

**H**e had walked quietly to the landing, tiptoeing up the stairs, shaking badly, but with a rage, now, and not with fear. He stripped off his pyjamas and felt the cool touch of night air on his naked skin. Then he banged loudly on the bannister.

As he expected, the door to his bedroom opened and something moved, with blurring speed, into the darkness.

Grey-green man stood at the far end of the landing, and Huxley sensed the way it watched, the way it suddenly grinned.

Jennifer was hissing, "What is it?"

Huxley moved along the landing. Grey-green came at him and there was static in the air where they almost touched.

"Go to the study," Huxley hissed stiffly. "Wait for me..."

There was hesitation in the ghost, then that mocking smile again, and yet... it acceded to the instruction. It passed Huxley, and went downstairs, lurking in the grim darkness.

Jennifer ran out onto the landing, dragging her housecoat around her. There was no sound of disturbance from the boy's room, and Huxley was glad.

She sounded anxious. "Is there someone in the house?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'd better look around."

Her hand touched his bare back as she peered over the banister into the gloom below. She seemed slightly startled. "You're so cool, now."

And a lot flabbier, he thought to himself.

And Jennifer added, "You smell fresher."

"Fresher?"

"You needed a good bath. But you smell... cleaner, suddenly..."

"I'm sorry if I smelled strong before."

"I quite liked it," she said quietly, and Huxley closed his eyes for a moment.

"But perhaps it's the sheets," Jennifer said. "I'll change them first thing in the morning."

"I'll investigate downstairs."

The french windows were open, the study light off. Huxley switched on the desk lamp and peered down at the open page of the journal.

Grey-green man had scrawled the words: then how do I get back? Must think. Will go to Horse Shrine and stay there. But the blood is hot. You must understand. I am not in control.

This entry occurred below the response that Huxley had penned to his alter ego's earlier, substantial account of Ash, and his questions about the nature of their dual existence.

Huxley had written:

We are clearly not the same, but only similar. We are aspects of two versions of George Huxley. If I am incomplete then it is in a way that is different from the incompleteness of you. You seem to be the most isolated. Perhaps your existence in this world, my world, is wrong for you. Perhaps there is a part of me that is running, fearful and dying, in a world that is more familiar to you.

If I had no other reason for concluding these things it is this: I have never called Jennifer "Jenny." Not ever. It is not possible for me to even contemplate writing that nickname. She is J. in my journals, or Jennifer. Never the shorter form.

Your Jennifer is not my Jennifer. I have let you loose upon the woman I love, and you have taught me one thing, about how callous I have become, and I accept that lesson. But you will not enter this house again, not beyond the study. If you do, I shall endeavour to destroy you, rather than help you. Even if it means losing Wynne-Jones for ever, I shall certainly find a way to disseminate the bestial spirit that you are.

I should prefer to return you to the body from which you have gone missing: my body, albeit in another location, another time, some other space and time that has somehow become confused with my own world.

Yes, other things give away the fact that we are living parallel lives, closely linked, yet subtly different. I refer to the "Urscumug," not "Urscumaga." You know more about Ash than I do. Wynne-Jones, in your world, has raced ahead of my own, pipe-reeking friend. The talisman most definitely was hung with leather, not horse hair. Clearly I am the hooded man over whom you ran, in your mad canter from the forest glade. My oilskin hood was torn, quite beyond repair!

And so you must propose a way for us to meet, to engage, to communicate.

But I repeat, you are not to enter, my house beyond this desk.

If you doubt that I have the skill to destroy you, then look into your own bestial heart: remember what I/you have achieved in the past. Remember what happened to you/I in the Wolf Glen, when we discovered a certain magic of our own, destructive to mythagos!

And below this entry, Grey-green man had scrawled then how do I get back?

Huxley closed and concealed the journal. He walked out into the garden, and stepped carefully



across the lawn to the bushes. The ground was wet with dew, the air scented with raw, rich night perfume of soil and leaf. Everything was very still.

Huxley stepped among the moist bushes of rhododendron and fuchsia. He pressed the wet leaves and flowers against his torso, and found, to his mild surprise, that he was excited by the touch of nature upon his dry, cool body. He rubbed leaves between his fingers, crushed fuschia flowers, reached down and rubbed his hands over the dewy soil. He drew breath in through his nostrils, filling his lungs, and as he stood so he smeared his hands over his shoulders and belly...

A blur of night-lit movement, the earth vibrating, the undergrowth shaking, and grey-green man was there, shimmering and shadowy, watching him.

They stood in silence, man and ghost, and then Huxley laughed. "You frightened me once, but no longer. And yet, I feel sympathy for you, and will try to send you back. By doing that I believe I can release Wynne-Jones."

Grey-green man took a slow step forward, reaching to Huxley.

Huxley stepped forward too, but ripped up a branch of bush, and swept it at the ghost.

"Go to the Horse Shrine! I'll meet you there tomorrow."

Grey-green man didn't cower, but there was something about it, something less triumphant than before. It hovered, then withdrew, then turned (or so Huxley thought) to stare again at its alter ego. It seemed to be questioning.

Huxley squeezed sap from the torn branch and rubbed it on his face.

"She likes the smell," he said, and laughed as he tossed the branch aside, before turning and entering the house.

Locking the french windows behind him.

Jennifer was sitting up in bed, the covers round her knees. She stared at Huxley by lamplight, her face puzzled, anguished.

"I want you tell to me what's going on," she said quietly, firmly. She was looking at him, staring at him, taking in his nakedness. He imagined he knew what she was thinking: he did not look like the body she had so recently felt against her. He was broader, chubbier, less fit.

"It will take some time."

"Then take time."

He climbed into bed beside her and on a new and strong impulse turned towards her, putting his arm across her to turn out the lamp.

"I would like to kiss you first," he said. "And then I'll tell you everything."

"One kiss, then. But I'm angry, George. And I want to know what's happening..."

#### FOURTEEN

**T**he boys were at school. Huxley entered their room and stood, for a moment, surveying the truly appalling mess that the lads had left after a weekend of playing, pillow fighting, and reading. They had been making a model boat, and against their father's instructions had brought the model up to their bedroom. The floor, the surfaces, the bed itself, were covered with bits of reed.

He reached down and picked up several sheets of white paper with pencil drawings. They were the blueprints for the model: crude, but skilful, and he recognized Christian's imagination at work here. He was impressed. Plan view, side view, rear elevation, cross section...

Of the ship itself there was no sign. It was an ambitious project. They usually contented themselves with smaller, wooden models.

The room was quiet and he closed his eyes for a moment, summoning the imaginations at work here. He banished from his mind the smell of unwashed socks that instantly struck his consciousness. What he wanted was to feel the *fantasies* of the boys, their dreams, and in this room he might be able to touch the edge of those dreams.

It was an odd thought, and yet: he was convinced that one of the boys had created the Ash mythago.

He went through their drawers, where clothes were crushed and crumbled, apple-cores rotted, penny dreadfuls were concealed, and rock-hard ends of sandwiches – made for midnight feasts – nestled side by side with pictures torn from magazines.

Eventually he found the fragments of wood and bone that Ash had left. They were still in their leather container. Huxley placed them on the desk, rolled them over the surface, remembered the time last winter when Snow Woman had left these items at the gate.

Then he went over to the bed and sat down, staring at the magic from across the room.

*Why did you leave these pieces? Why? Why did you come to Oak Lodge? Why did you destroy the chickens? Why did you ensure that Steven would see you?*

*Why?*

Steven and his passion for presents, his need for gifts. Had he created a mythago that was designed to fulfil that need in him?

*Give me something. Bring me something. Bring me a gift. Give me something that makes me feel... wanted...*

Was she Steven's mythago, then? Gift-bringing Ash. But what sort of gift was implied in two fragments of thorn, and a piece of wild cat?

Perhaps Steven was intended to wear them. Perhaps then he would journey, in the same way that Huxley had journeyed. These bits of wood represented a different forest, though.

*Why did you come out of the wood? Why did you leave these fragments? Why the chickens? What did you hope to achieve?*

He thought back to the time in the Horse Shrine. Ash had watched him closely and carefully for a long while, and perhaps there had been disappointment in her face? Was she expecting someone else?

She had been waiting for someone. She had been at the Horse Shrine since the winter, if the evidence of the waste spoils was to be believed. She had been trying to make contact with the Huxleys, and yet all she had done was send George Huxley on a nightmarish trip to a freezing wood, long in the past...

If she had wanted Steven, what had she wanted to do with him?

And if Wynne-Jones had been present in the same ancient mythagorealm – and the grey-green man



suggested that perhaps this was the case – what had Ash wanted with him?

How had he come to play a part in the same ancient sequence?

Why had he played any part at all, if Ash had wanted Steven...?

Huxley prowled the room, drinking in the disorder, tapping the imagination that reverberated here.

Steven and Ash... a shocking visitation to the henhouse... a bed of dead hens... *just like in the story...*

**H**e went quickly to the window, staring down at the yard, the spring sunshine. He tried to replay the whole of that snow-deadened encounter, after Christmas.

What had Steven said to his mother? "Got them all... just like in the story..."

What story?

Steven hadn't seen inside the shed, but Huxley had told him that all the hens had been killed. A fox had done it, he said, and Steven had seemed to accept that statement, despite the fact that Ash had clearly been to the henhouse herself.

What story?

Steven had said, "That old drummer fox..."

Huxley had taken no notice, and Jennifer had simply responded to the shock of losing all their hens.

Who was that "old drummer fox"?

He looked at the scattered books, searched among them, but found nothing. He called for Jennifer and she came into the room, frowning at the mess. She looked as tired as she felt. It had been a long night, and a long talk, and Huxley had told her much that she should have known before, and explained about the supernatural event that was occurring.

Not unsurprisingly, Jennifer was shocked, and was still shocked, and had spent an hour on her own, fighting a feeling of nausea. He had left her alone. It had seemed inappropriate to try to explain that in a way she had slept only with her husband, that no man from this, the real world, had touched her apart from Huxley. But that was not how she saw it, and there were other considerations too, no doubt.

"Drummer Fox and Boy Ralph? That was Steven's favourite story for years, when he was much younger. He was obsessed with it..."

"I've never heard of it."

"Of course," she said acidly. "You never read anything to the boys. I did all the reading."

"Rebuke accepted," Huxley said quickly. "Can you find the book? I must see that story."

She searched the shelves, and the scatter of books on the floor, opened the wardrobe where albums, school books, and magazines were stored, but couldn't find the volume of tales that included Drummer Fox.

Huxley felt impatient and anxious. "I must know the story."

"Why?"

"I think it may be the key to what is happening. What can you remember of it? You said you'd read it to him –"

"Hundreds of times. But a long time ago."

"Tell me the story."

She leaned back against one of the desks and gathered her thoughts. "Oh Lord, George. It's so long





ago. And I read so many stories to them, Christian especially..."

"Try. Please try."

"He was a sort of gypsy fox. Very old, older than any human alive. He'd been wandering Europe for centuries, with a drum, which he beat every dawn and dusk, and a sack of tricks. He either played tricks on people to escape from them, or entertained them for his supper. He also had a charge, an infant boy."

"Boy Ralph."

"That's right. Boy Ralph was the son of a Chief, a warrior of the olden days. But the boy was born on a highly auspicious day and his father was jealous and decided to kill the infant by smothering him. He was planning to use carcase of a chicken for the vile deed."

"Drummer Fox lived at the edge of the village, entertaining people with his tricks and sometimes giving them prophesies. He liked the boy and seeing him in danger stole him and ran away with him. The King sent a giant of a warrior after the fox, with instructions to hunt him down and kill them both. So Drummer Fox found himself running for his life."

"Wherever Drummer Fox went he found that humans were tricky and destructive. He didn't trust them. Some were kind and he left them alone. He always paid a small price for whatever he had taken from them. But others were hunters and tried to kill him. At night he would make his bed in their chicken sheds, making mattresses and blankets from the dead chicks..."

Huxley slapped his knees as he heard this. "Go on..."

"He used to say, (and here, Jennifer put on a silly country voice) 'Nothing against the chicks but their clucking. They'd give me away. Give me away. So better a feather bed than a nice egg in the morning. Sorry chicks...'"

"And then he'd silently kill the lot of them."

"Of course. This is a story for children." Huxley shared Jennifer's smile. "Anyway, that isn't all. Drummer Fox made the infant Ralph a plaything of the heads of the chickens, threaded on a piece of string."

Huxley was astonished and delighted. "Good God! That's exactly what had happened in the chicken house. And Steven never saw inside! He didn't know about that particularly gruesome piece of Ash's game. Go on. Go on!"

"That's more or less it, really. The fox is on the run. He gets what he can from the human folk he meets, but if in danger he tricks the humans into the forest where they invariably get crushed under the hooves of the Hunter who's following the fox. It's quite murderous stuff. The boys lapped it up."

"And how is it resolved? Is it resolved?"

Jennifer had to think for a moment, then she remembered. "Drummer Fox gets cornered in a deep, wooded valley. The Hunter is almost on him. So the fox makes a mask and puts it on and goes up to greet the giant warrior."

"What mask?"

"That's the clever part. For a child, at least. He puts on a fox mask. He tells the Hunter that he's a local man who has tricked Drummer Fox by pretending to be a renegade fox as well. Drummer Fox has revealed his weakness to him. To destroy the fox all the Hunter

needs to do is to disguise himself on horseback with dry rushes and reeds."

"Aha. The ending loometh."

"The Hunter duly ties reeds all over his body and..."

"Drummer Fox sets light to him!"

"And away he gallops, trailing flame and cursing the Fox. The nice or nasty little coda is that one day Drummer Fox and Boy Ralph are making their way back through a dark wood when they hear a hunting horn and the smell of burning."

"The stuff of nightmares," Huxley said, pacing about the room, thinking hard. "No wonder the boy is afraid of horses. Good God, we've probably traumatized him for life."

"It's only a story. The stories the boys tell each other are far more gruesome. But then they've leafed extensively through the copy of Gray's Anatomy on your shelf."

"Have they. Have they indeed. Then at least their stories will be colourful."

"Does it help? Drummer Fox, I mean?"

Huxley swung round and walked up to Jennifer, gathering her into his arms and hugging her. "Yes. Oh yes. Very much indeed." She seemed startled, then drew back, smiling.

"Thank you for letting me know about your madness," she said quietly. "Whatever I can do..."

"I know. I don't know what you can do for the moment. But I feel deeply relieved to have told you what is happening. The grey-green figure frightens me, even though I know it is an aspect of me."

Jennifer went pale and looked away. "I don't wish to think about that any more. I just want you to be safe. And to be near me more often..." The look in her eye as she glanced at him made Huxley smile. They touched hands, and then went downstairs.

## FIFTEEN

A wonderful example of convergence, or perhaps merging: Steven's imagination is inculcated with the legend and image of the fox; but Drummer Fox is just a corruption of a more powerful mythological cycle concerning Ash. Ash herself is a "story" reflecting an ancient event, perhaps an incident from the first migrations and movements of a warrior elite of Indo-Europeans, from central Europe.

Ash, the inherited memory, is present in Steven's mind, and the corrupted form of the folk-tale/fable is also strongly present. So Ash - created by Steven - emerges from the wood with associations of Drummer Fox: hence the killing of chickens, the necklace of hen heads.

But this Ash has no child!

Drummer Fox: shaman? The drum, the classic instrument of shamanic trance. And Fox's bag of tricks. The same as Ash's bone and wood bag, her magic.

And Ash carries a tiny wrist-drum!

The story of Ash, then, has been shaped by a time nearer to her own origination as a legendary tale. Later, as the tale corrupts further into Drummer Fox and other tales of that ilk, so certain shaman trappings return.

Steven summoned Ash. Ash came, half myth, half folklore, and called to Steven. Her gift at the gate - the bone and wood pieces - is part attraction to Steven, part the price she pays for her night's stay on the carcasses of the hens.

She wants Steven, then. But why? To replace the lost child? Drummer Fox protects Infant Ralph. In one story - the Ash story - has she, I wonder, lost the child? Does she then seek to replace the lost child with another, perhaps so that she can pretend that the true "prince" is still alive?

How I wish I knew more of the Ash legend.



Wynne-Jones and myself are seen as "intruders, not to be trusted" and sent to the "hooves of the horses" by Ash. But she selects a key moment, a primary event in mythological time, when images occur that will last into the corrupted form: the burning man, the horses riding wild, the crushing of men below hooves.

So is it Steven who has directed this aspect of Ash? Or is it Ash conforming to the older ritual?

And how do I convince Ash to return me to that moment? And once there, how do I return Wynne-Jones safely?

And how did my alter-ego slip into this world from his own?

A primary moment, a focus, may be the meeting point of many worlds simply because of its importance...

I must return to that moment. Something happened there, something was there, that will explain the complication!

*You will have to offer her Steven. You fool! Don't you see? You will have to offer her the boy. And then trust her. Can you trust her? Can WE trust her? She will not perform her magic without the gift she seeks. Fool!*

But I came back. She cast me away, into a landscape both remote in time and place, but it was not a permanent dislocation. She is Steven's mythago. This has tempered the fury that might otherwise be present within her. I still have the necklet of wood and bones with which she dispatched me before; now I will hope to reason with her.

He left the journal open on his desk and went through the house to begin to collect his supplies and equipment for the trek. At some point during the next ten minutes he was aware of the wafting smell of undergrowth in the house, and the sound of movement from his office. The visit was brief, and he caught sight of the shadow as it ran with uncanny speed back across the field to the woodland edge.

A brief response, then, and without much interest Huxley returned to read what had been written.

"Damnation!"

He ran to the garden, dropping the journal as he went. "Come back!" he shouted. "You're wrong. I'm sure! Damn!"

Now he was frightened. He swept up the journal, turned again to the scrawled line: *Steven is not safe from Ash. She must be destroyed* and then flung the book into its hiding place.

Now there was no time to lose. He roughly packed his sack, crammed whatever food lay to hand – bread, cheese, a piece of cold mutton – and almost demolished Jennifer as he ran to the garden.

"Wait until dawn at least..." she said, recovering from the impact and helping him gather the spilled items from his sack.

"I can't."

"You're in a lather, George..."

Furious, eyes blazing with panic, he hissed, "He's going to kill her! That will undo everything. Wynne-Jones, gone forever. Maybe..." He hesitated, and bit back the words, "Steven too."

"I have to follow him," he went on, "And fast. God, he's so fast..."

Jennifer sighed, seemed sad, then kissed her husband.

"Off you go then. Be careful. For the boys' sake, and for mine."

He made a feeble attempt at humour. "I'll return

with Wynne-Jones, or on him..."

"But lose his pipe, if you can," she added, then turned quickly away as her voice began to break.

## SIXTEEN

It took Huxley over four hours to locate the Horse Shrine, the longest search ever. He had been confident of the route, but became distracted by the sudden change in the wood from a stifling, chirruping zoo of green light and intense shade, to a silent, gloomy dell, where the overpowering smell of decay set his heart racing and his senses pounding. By moving too fast through this deadly glade he disorientated himself, and took hours to find some part of Ryhope Wood that prompted memory.

At one point a blur of movement swept past him, noisily disappearing into the deep wood. At first he thought that it might be the grey-green man, overtaking him on his passage inwards, but then remembered that his shadow was far ahead of him. More likely, then, the movement was one of the various forms of the Green Jack. As such he took precautionary manoeuvres and measures against attack, keeping his leather flying jacket firmly buttoned to the throat, despite the humidity, and holding a small wooden shield on the side of his face nearest the disturbance.

It was maddening to be so lost, and to be so desperate to find a shrine that, over the years, he had found with no difficulty.

By a stream he washed his face and cleaned his boots, which were heavy with clay from a tree-crowded mire into which he had stumbled. His lungs were tight with pollen and the damp, heavy air. His mouth was foul. His eyes stung with dust, tiny seeds, and the endless slanting, slashing light from above the dense foliage cover.

The stream was a blessing. He didn't recognize it, although the ruins of a building on its far bank, a building in Norman style, high earth defences, compact and economic use of stone, reminded him of a place he had seen three years before. He knew from experience that the mythagoscapes changed subtly, and that they could be brought into existence by different minds and therefore with slightly different features. If this building was a corrupting form of the river station – from a story-cycle told in the courts of William Rufus – which he had recorded before, then the Horse Shrine lay behind him.

He had come too far.

There was no use in using a compass in this wood. All magnetic poles shifted and changed, and north could be seen to turn a full three hundred and sixty degrees in the stepping of four paces in a straight line. Nor was there any guarantee that the perspective of the wood had not changed; hour by hour the primal landscape altered its relationship with its own internal architecture. It was as if the whole forest was turning, a whirlpool, a spinning galaxy, turning around the voyager, confusing senses, direction and time. And the further inwards one journeyed, the more that place laughed, played tricks, like old Drummer Fox, casting a glamour upon the eyes of the naive beholder.

No. There was no guarantee of anything, here. All Huxley knew was that he was lost. And being lost, yet being comforted by this encounter with the river-station of the piratical Gylla, from the eleventh-



century story, he felt suddenly confident. He had nothing to use but his judgement. And he had something of great value to lose: his friend of many years standing...

So he summoned his courage and returned along the trail.

The sound of a horse screaming finally allowed me to locate the shrine, but on arrival at the wide glade I found only desertion and shambles. Something has been here and almost utterly destroyed the place. The monstrous bone effigy of a horse, with its attendant skeletal drivers, is shattered, the bone parts spread throughout the glade and the wood around. They are overgrown, some even moss-covered, as if they have lain like this for many years. Yet I know this place was intact just a few days ago.

The stone temple remains. There are withered leather sacks inside it, some decayed form of food offering, fragments of clay, two wristlets of carved, yellowing ivory pieces resembling crude equines, and carved, I imagine, from horse's teeth. There is also a fresh painting on the grey stone of the outside of the place, a mark, like no animal or hieroglyph that I have encountered. It is complex, of course symbolic, and utterly meaningless. Depicted in a mixture of charcoal and orange ochre, it is tantalizing. My sketch, over the page, does not do it justice.

No sign of the horse that screamed.

Light going, night coming. No sign of Ash, and no movement around. This place is dead. Eerie. I shall make a single foray in a wide circle, then return here for the night.

**H**e finished writing and packed the book away in his rucksack. With a nervous glance around he entered the dense woodland again, and ducked below the branches, hesitating as he orientated himself, then striking away from the glade by measured paces, constantly stopping and listening.

He had intended to walk a wide circle, but after a few minutes the abrupt and noisy flight of dark birds, behind him, caught his attention and induced in him a state of frozen silence. He hugged the dark trunk of a tree, peering through the light-shattered gloom for any substantial movement.

When, after a minute or so, he had seen nothing, he began a hesitant return to the glade.

The sound of a scream, a woman's angry, fearful cry, shocked him, then set him running.

A small fire was burning, close to the stone walls of the shrine. The intensity of the flame, the sharp crackle of wood, told Huxley instantly that the fire was new. He was tantalized by the thought that Ash had been near the clearing all the time, watching him, waiting for him to leave.

He approached, now, crouching low in the cover. Ash was a running shape, a twisting, struggling form, caught darkly in the light from her own fire. Something grappled with her, hitting at her. He could hear the blows. Her cries of anger became groans of pain, but she fought back with vigour, rough skirts swirling, arms swinging.

Huxley dropped his pack and stepped quickly into the clearing. The process of murder was interrupted and Ash looked at him angrily, then with puzzlement. Behind her, the wood shimmered and the grey-green shape of a man moved swiftly to the right. He still had hold of Ash and the startled woman stumbled as her head was wrenched back, dragging her over.

"Let her go! Let go of her at once!"

Huxley snatched a piece of burning wood from the small fire. He dropped it at once and yelled as flame curled round his fingers, singing the hair on his skin. More carefully he selected a fragment of branch that was burning only at the end -

And grimaced as he realized that the whole of the wood was at what felt like red heat!

- And charged at the shadow of his alter ego.

Ash was being throttled. Her body had pitched back, her naked legs thrashing. Her head and upper torso were hidden by the brush. Her cries were stifled, choking.

Huxley leapt through the undergrowth and thrust the burning brand at the shadow.

"Get away from her! I won't have this, do you understand me? Stop at once!"

The fire at the end of the brand went out. He shook the wood vigorously, hoping to restart the flame, but the life had gone from it.

Then his face erupted with pain and he felt himself flung back into the clearing. He moaned with genuine discomfort and struggled to stand, but all strength had evaporated from his legs, and he fell back, onto one elbow, reached to hold his face, now numbed and oddly loose around the jaw.

Distantly he heard a sharp crack, a half cry, fading quickly, a woman's cry, dying.

"Oh Dear God, he's killed her... I've killed her..."

Fire burned into his eyes and he shrieked and struck against the brand. A foot crushed down upon his belly, and when he doubled so he felt a further blow, by foot or hand it was hard to tell, against his eyes, striking him flat again. The fire waved down, the flames took on his shirt, and he patted a hand at them, before again fingers closed around his wrist and wrenched him up, to a sitting position, half blinded by flickering yellow fire, and -

Rope around his neck!

Tightening!

He snatched and scrabbled at the thong, managed to cry out. "Stop this! You have no right! Stop this at once..."

He was lifted, turned, swung. He struggled to retain a degree of dignity, but felt his feet leave the ground and his stomach turn over as he was dragged around by the creature, swinging him with astonishing strength, finally flinging him against the stone of the shrine.

He looked up, then felt burning and realized he was half in the fire. He scrabbled away from the heat, but had the presence of mind to fling gleaming shards and hot ashes against the blurry shadow that had come to tower over him. Where they impacted he caught the grim outline of a naked man, leaning down, and he could tell the smile, and the glitter of menace in the eyes that watched.

A voice like bubbling water hissed, "Let her die..."

"Animal!" Huxley spat. "You sicken me. To think that you are a part of me. Dear God, I hope I never live to see the day that -"

"Stee-vaaaan..."

It was an animal howl. It shattered Huxley's concentration. It rattled his nerves. There was such desperation in the cry, such need, such fury. The grey-green shadow bent to its task of killing, but on its lips, on the green-shadow gates of hell that were the



exit from its heart, on that invisible, yet tangible mouth was his son's name, and love for his son, love, and compassion too, a misguided, misdirected shadow that fought and killed to save the life of

"Stee-vaaaaan..."

Again the howl of anguish, and then the creature went to work; and with what energy, what power it began to rend the prone and failing body of the man, the human creature that lay before it! Huxley experienced the scientific process of his death with abstract, disconnected ease...

**H**e had no strength left. There was nothing he could do.

That he witnessed the leather thong that suddenly appeared around the shadow's neck was more a testimony to the strength of the scientific curiosity that inhabited the man than any strength of will, or need to survive. He had documented the punishment to his body, and thought only of how this grey-green shadow, this dissection of his mind, his personality, loose in an alien world, could summon the forces of nature such that it could be tangible, whole, and sexual...

It was a beast at large, a creature formed from mind, myth and manhood, substance crowning the power of its thoughts, its needs, its desires, its baser hungers. And within that hunger lurked the higher mind that Huxley was proud to call his own, the awareness of love, the curiosity that formed the exploring nature of a man like Wynne-Jones, or young Christian Huxley, or George himself. Poor George. Poor old George.

On the strangling leather, two pieces of wood and a sharp shard of bone showed up clearly by the scattered light of the scattered fire, and the grey green man shrieked and drew back, swung on his own noose, caught by his own animalistic arrogance as Ash, one arm hanging quite limp, the other wrapped around the thong, dragged the shadow backwards. The eerie sound of his cry was suddenly drowned by the violent flight of birds from all around, a massive flight that filled the glade of the horse shrine with leaves and feathers, and the darkening sky with a streaming blur of circling shapes.

There were horses in the wood. They snorted, stamped and shook their manes, with a rustling of woodland and a rattle and clatter of crude stone and bone trappings, slung on hair twine and stretched and softened leather... They were everywhere, all around, and Huxley groped his way to his knees, watching the dark woods.

Movement everywhere. And sound, like chanting; and the rapid beating of drums, the rhythmic rattle of bone and shell... It was all so familiar. He could hear the cries of tortured men, and the shrieking laughter that had so unnerved him in a recent encounter. All of this was taking place deeper in the wood, almost out of sight.

Ash had let go of grey-green man and now stood shakily at the edge of the glade, her good arm flexing as she used the wrist drum to beat out a frantic tattoo. And behind her, light... fire light...

And passing quickly across that light, as it came nearer, a stooped, running shape, a man's shape, swathed in cloak and hood. Which vanished into darkness.

In the centre of the glade the grey-green shadow rose from where it had fallen, tall, frightened, arms reaching out from its sides, head turning this way and that. Again, Huxley watched its sleek, virile form, the hard musculature, the animal liteness as it stepped swiftly to one side, then prowled, half crouched, back across the glade.

The woods were on fire. Flame began to streak into the darkening night. The grey-green man rose from his cowering position, darted to Huxley, bent close.

"Wrong..." he breathed.

Huxley backed away, still frightened of the raw power that emanated from the creature. "What is wrong?"

"I..."

Huxley tried to understand, but his mind was befuddled by beating and fear. He said, "Don't kill Ash..."

But the creature seemed to ignore him. It said simply, "Return."

"What do you mean? What do you mean return? Who?" Huxley struggled to sit. "Who do you mean? Me? You?"

"I..." said the grey-green man, and the hand that reached suddenly to the flinching Huxley merely touched a finger to his lips, closed Huxley's mouth, lingered, then was gone.

And with it, the grey-green shadow, fleeing towards the flame-horse, which burst into the glade, a mass of burning rushes, wrapped around the stiff corpse strapped to the horse's back.

The horse screamed. It was huge. It was higher at the back than a tall man, a giant of a beast, burning, to be sacrificed along with the flaming cadaver that rode it to hell and beyond.

The grey-green shadow seemed to fall beneath its hooves, but then a blur of colour, of light and darkness, moved effortlessly up behind the flaming corpse, and reached around almost to hug the flames. The horse reared, scattering burning strands of rush, fire that filled the noisy glade. The animal turned, struggling through pain and panic, then kicked forward again, the body shifting and shaking on its back, streams of fire like flags, rising and waving in the night wind.

And Grey-green man followed it, and went out of the horse shrine, riding to hell, riding home, riding through the breach in whatever fabric between the worlds had been rended in that earlier and near fatal encounter with the horses, and the time of sacrifice.

I felt sure that my shadow had been taken back to its rightful body, that version of me that had unwittingly and unwillingly shed its darker aspect.

With the departure of the shadow there was, in myself at least, a sense of inordinate relief. I saw Ash across the glade, a bruised and battered woman, the wrist drum in her hand being flexed with almost urgent need.

I understood that she had helped me. And I suppose she helped me because she had recognized that I had helped her, that the two forms of Huxley with which she had come into contact were not the same at all, and that I was a friend, whereas the violent *anima* was not.

All was not finished. I had underestimated (I probably always shall) the subtle power of this mythago form, this Ash, this shaman, this worker of magic within the frame of weirdness that is Ryhope Wood.

She had not sent me to the time of horses. She had -



perhaps through gratitude – brought the time of horses to the shrine... She had located the event further away from the shrine itself, so that as I wrestled with the primogenetic manifestation of the grey-green man so I was also watching the sacrifice at some way distant. That hooded shape, passing before the flames... myself, perhaps, of the earlier encounter. The flame-horse had ridden on to recapture the errant part of the personality that had played truant from my alternative presence in the wood...

It makes me shudder to think of it, but surely I was the corpse in the flames; in that other world, from which Grey-green man had come, Ash's banishment of me to the past had ended in cruel murder.

Grey-green man had written: *I was riding the horse when it collided with the hooded man. I remember falling. The horse was bolting. It had two bodies on its back. One alive (me) beginning to burn badly. One dead. The hooded man was struck. I fell, the horse ran on.*

But there had been only one body, flaming, and only the animal survival of the dying, screaming man within the rushes allowed one part of its anima to escape, to cling to me, to haunt me.

Poor George. Poor old George.

These sinister thoughts fled rapidly when, with a feeling of joy almost childlike in its power and its simplicity, I saw Wynne-Jones again...

**T**hree giant horses, their riders strapped to their backs, encased in an armour made from nature: already rush and reed, flaming, had fled the glade. Now the chalk-white corpse rode around the stone shrine, white rider on a black steed, limbs pinned and positioned by the frame of wood that held the victim upright on the crude cloth saddle. Then came the rider all decked out in thorns, a weave, a suit of branches and berries that allowed only the face to show, a face as dead, as barren as the chalk escarpments of the downs.

But the fourth of the horses carried the man of animal rags, the skins and limbs and heads of the creatures of field, forest and wood, the gaping heads of fox, cat and pig, the hides of grey, brown and winter-white creatures, all draped, bloodily and savagely, around the wild rider.

Crucified in the saddle, but alert and alive, the ragman was ridden round the glade on the back of a stallion whose face showed its pain, its torture, and whose snorting scream told of its fury. It stamped as it waited, pawed the ground, kicked back against the stones of the shrine, and eyed the wood, listening to the whooping calls of the herders, the men who chased the sacrifices through the woodland.

Around its neck dangled a necklace of wood and bone – three pieces!

"Edward! Dear God, Edward!"

The eyes of the man swathed in the rags of creatures widened, but no sound escaped the lips of the face that suddenly flexed with recognition and hope.

As the horse bolted towards Huxley, intending to again penetrate the forest, Huxley flung himself in front of the creature, watched it rear and stamp against him. He backed away, then darted to its side, reached up and tore the crucifix from the great beast's back, bringing the wood down upon him, Wynne-Jones and the stink and slime of freshly cut pelts with it, so that the two men tumbled in blood and rot, while the horse entered the wood and was lost.

Huxley unbound his friend. Ash hastened to them, grabbed at Huxley's sleeve and drew them swiftly

away into cover. She also tugged the necklet from his chest, indicating that Wynne-Jones should do the same.

When Huxley glanced backwards he saw the tall herders enter the glade, dark shapes in the dying fire, beating at the space with flint tipped weapons, calling for their mares and stallions. But rapidly, as if fading into a sudden distance, the sound of chanting and drumming drifted away, became a mere hint of sound, then was gone completely.

**A**t some time during the night, as Huxley huddled in half sleep against the shivering body of his friend, Ash slipped away into the darkness, abandoning the men. She took with her the necklet of wood and bone that had earlier transported Huxley to the ancient version of the Horse Shrine. But she left the small wrist drum, and Huxley reached for it and twirled it, watching the small stones strike the taut hide on each side of the decorated box.

A gift for Steven, he wondered? Or something for himself, something with a hidden power? He decided not to beat the drum, not in these woods.

They found a stream during their walk in the raw dawn, and Wynne-Jones washed the blood and filth from his body, drawing on Huxley's spare clothes gratefully.

"I've lost my pipe," he murmured sadly, as they began the long trek back to Oak Lodge.

"Someone, or something, will use it as a talisman," Huxley said. Wynne-Jones laughed.

#### CODA

**S**teven came running across the thistle meadow, kicking with skinny legs through the high grass. One flap of his white school shirt was hanging loose over the belt of his short grey-flannel trousers. He looked upset, hair unkempt, shirt buttons undone.

He was calling for his father.

Huxley crouched down, huddled back behind the ruined gate that almost blocked the access at the woodland edge to the muddy stream that wound so deeply into Ryhope Wood. He hunched up, hugging the undergrowth in the dark, slippery area where the stream widened and dropped a few inches to weave its way inwards. The trees here were like sentries, reaching inwards, outwards, towering over the ramshackle gate, their roots a twisting snake-like mass that made entry all the more difficult.

Brightness entered this gloomy gateway to hell from the summer's afternoon beyond, and Steven at last came to the high bank that dropped to the stream. Here he called for his father yet again.

Behind him, Wynne-Jones and Jennifer were crossing the field more slowly. Huxley rose slightly, peered at them, and beyond them at the house...

Wrong! There was something wrong...

"Dear God in Heaven... What has happened?"

"Daddy!"

The boy was in earnest. Huxley looked at him again, out on the open land. All he could see, now, was Steven's silhouette. It disturbed him. Steven was standing on the rise of ground just beyond the brambles, the thorns, and the old gate that had been tied across the channel to stop animals entering this dangerous stretch of wood. The boy's body was bent



to one side as he peered into the impenetrable gloom of the forest. Huxley watched him, sensing his concern, and the anguish. Steven's whole posture was that of a sad and earnest young man, desperate to make contact with his father.

Motionless. Peering anxiously into the realm that perhaps he suddenly feared.

"Daddy?"

"Steve. I'm here. Wait there, I'm coming out."

The boy hugged him delightedly. The house in the distance was a dark shape, bare of ivy. The great beech outside the boys' bedroom was as he remembered it. The field, the overgrown field, was four weeks advanced from when he had left it.

Something was wrong.

"How long have I been gone, Steven?"

The boy was only too glad to talk. "Two days. We were worried. Mummy's been crying a lot."

"I'm home now, lad."

"Mummy says it wasn't you who shouted at me..."

"No. It wasn't. It was a ghost."

"A ghost!"

(Said with delight).

"A ghost. But the ghost has gone back to hell, now. And I'm home too."

Jennifer was calling to him. From his crouching position Huxley watched her as she walked quickly towards him, her face pale, but her lips smiling. Edward Wynne-Jones staggered along behind her, a man exhausted by his ordeal, and confused by Huxley's sudden terror as he had reached the edgewoods and refused to emerge into open land.

There was so little time., Huxley thought, and took Steven by the shoulders. The boy gaped at his father, then shut his mouth as he realized that he was about to be addressed in earnest.

"Steven... don't go into the woods. Do you promise me?"

"Why?"

"No questions, lad! Promise me... for God's sake... promise me, Steven... don't go into Ryhope Wood. Not now, not ever, not even when I'm dead. Do you understand me?"

Of course he understood his father. What he couldn't understand was the why. He gulped and nodded, glancing nervously at the dense wood.

Huxley shook him. "For your own sake, Steve... I beg you... don't ever again play in the woods. Never!"

"I promise," the boy said meekly, frightened.

"I don't want to lose you -"

From close by Jennifer called, "George. Are you all right?"

Steven was crying, tears on his cheeks, his face fixed in a brave look, not sobbing or breaking up: just crying.

"I don't want to lose you," Huxley whispered, and gathered the boy to him, holding him so very tightly. Steven's hands remained draped by his sides.

"When did the farmer last mow this meadow?" he asked his son, and he felt Steven's shrug.

"I don't know. About a month ago? We came and gathered hay. Like we always do."

"Yes. Like we always do."

Jennifer ran up to him and quickly hugged him, a full embrace. "George! Thank God you're safe. Come back to the house and get washed and freshened up."





I'll make us all some food..."

He stood and let Jennifer take him home.

Edward has read the entire account of the Bone Forest and is much exercised by its detail and implications. He was puzzled by my reference to having "destroyed mythagos in the Wolf Glen," a statement I made when warning the grey-green man away from Jennifer. He seemed bemused when I explained that this had merely been a bluff to win the fight: after all, Grey-green man – myself of an alternative reality – was fully aware that our experiences in the mythago-real of Ryhope were subtly different, so how could he be sure that at a time when he – Huxley – had failed to destroy an aggressive mythago, I – Huxley – had not succeeded? It was a sufficient bluff, I believe. Grey-green man was discouraged from the house and held to the wood, although in retrospect my decision came close to being fatal for Ash.

WJ agrees with me that Ash – the original mythic tale of Ash – is closely related to horses, perhaps to the Horse Shrine itself, and that in her original form she was a female shaman who exercised particular power over the untamed horses of the valley of her origin.

My regret is that I did not communicate with her on the subject of the primal myth, the core legend: I wonder if she might have had –

**"D**addy?" Huxley looked up sharply from his desk, the words in his mind flowing and becoming confused.

"What the devil is it?"

He turned in his chair, furious at the interruption to his train of thought. Steven stood in the doorway, in his dressing gown, looking shocked, nervous. He was holding a mug of hot chocolate.

"What is it, boy? I'm working!"

"Will you tell me the story?"

"What story?"

Huxley glanced back at his journal, laid his finger on the last line, trying to summon the words that were fading from mind so fast.

Steven had faltered. He was torn, it seemed, between running upstairs, or standing his ground. His eyes were wide, but there was a frown on his face. "You said as soon as you came back you'd tell me a story about Romans."

"I said no such thing!"

"But you did...!"

"Don't argue with me, Steven. Get to bed with you!"

Meekly, Steven stepped away. His mouth was tight as he whispered, "Goodnight."

Huxley turned back to the journal, scratched his head, inked his pen and continued. He had written – concerning Ash – that she might have had:

some awareness of what I believe was called the Urscumug? But probably she dates from a time considerably later than this primal myth.

The mythago that is Ash can manipulate time. This is an incredible discovery, should it be confirmed by later study. So Ryhope Wood is not just a repository of legendary creatures created in the present day... its defensive nature, its warping of time, its playing with time and space... these physical conditions can be imparted to the mythago forms themselves: Ash's magic – perhaps legendary in her own time – seems to become real in this wood. WJ and myself have travelled through time. We were sent, separately, to an event that had occurred in the cold, ancient past, an event of such power (for the minds of the day) that it has drawn

to it not just our space and time, but others too, similar times, alternatives, the stuff of fantasy, the stuff of wilder dreams.

For one brief instant, the wood was opened to dimensions inconceivable. Grey-green man came through, returned. And for my part, my memory was affected, a dream, perhaps, like many dreams... I had thought the meadow to be newly cropped, but clearly this had been a dream, and I had mis-remembered.

Ryhope Wood plays tricks more subtle than I had previously imagined.

I am safely home, however, and WJ too. He talks of "gates," pathways and passages to mythic forms of hell. He is becoming obsessed with this idea, and claims to have found such a gateway in the wood itself.

So: two old men (no! I don't feel old. Just a little tired!) Two tired men, each with an obsession. And a wealth of wonder to explore, given time, energy, and the freedom from those concerns that can so interfere with the process of intellectualizing such a wondrous place as exists beyond the edgewoods.

**H**uxley capped his pen, leaned back and stretched, yawning fiercely. Outside, the late summer night was well advanced. He blotted the page of the journal, hesitated – tempted to turn back a few pages – then closed it.

Returning to the sitting room he found Jennifer reading. She looked up at him solemnly, then forced a smile.

"All finished?"

"I think so."

She was thoughtful for a moment, then said gently, "Don't make promises you don't intend to keep."

"What promises?"

"A story for Steven."

"I made him no promise..."

Jennifer sighed angrily. "If you say so, George."

"I do say so."

But he softened his tone. Perhaps he had forgotten a promise to tell Steven a Roman story. Perhaps, in any event, he should have been gentler with the boy. Reaching into his pocket he drew out the wrist-drum that Ash had left.

"Look at this. I found it at the Horse Shrine. I'll give it to Steve in the morning."

Jennifer took the drum, smiled, shook it and made it beat its staccato rhythm. She shivered. "It feels odd. It feels old."

Huxley agreed. "It is old." And added with a laugh. "A better trophy than that last one, eh?"

"Trophy?"

"Yes. You remember... that raw and bloody bone in my study. You kicked it and called it a trophy..."

"Raw and bloody bone?"

She looked quite blank, not understanding him.

Huxley stood facing her for a long while, his head reeling. Eventually she shrugged and returned to her book. He turned, left the room, walked stiffly back to his study and opened the journal at the page where Grey-green man had left his second message.

The message was there all right.

But with a moan of despair and confusion, Huxley placed his hand upon the page, upon the scrawled words, touched a finger-tip to the part of the paper where, just a few days ago, there had been a smear of blood, confusing and concealing part of Grey-green man's script.



And where now there was no blood. No blood at all.  
He sat for a long time, staring out through the open windows, to the garden and the wood beyond. At length he picked up the pen, turned to the end of the journal and started to write.

*It would seem that I am not quite home  
Confused about this.  
Maybe Wynne-Jones will have an answer  
Must return to Shrine again  
Everything feels right, but not right  
Not quite home*

Copyright © Robert Holdstock, 1991




**Robert Holdstock** was born in Kent in 1948. His science-fiction and horror books include *Eye Among the Blind* (1976), *Earthwind* (1977), *Necromancer* (1978), *Where Time Winds Blow* (1981) and *In the Valley of the Statues* (1982). His most successful works to date, though, are the fantasy *Mythago Wood* (1984) and its quasi-sequel *Lavondyss* (1988) – to which the above novella is a prequel. We're very pleased to welcome him to *Interzone* for the first time.

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# Robert Holdstock

Interview by Stan Nicholls

Robert Holdstock says everything he has ever written includes elements of the paranormal. "There were ghosts in *Eye Among the Blind*, Jungian symbolism in *Earthwind*, and supernatural creatures in *Where Time Winds Blow*."

"Very early on I remember people saying to me, 'You don't write traditional science fiction; you seem to be crossing genres. Won't you have trouble selling the books?' The answer is, yes, I suppose I may have sold the books better if they had been clear-cut space opera or fantasy, but it never bothered me. I've always crossed genres and 'mixed it up.'"

"*Mythago Wood* is a classic example; it's history, time travel, myth, science...I simply wrote what came naturally, and what came naturally had strong elements of what Ian Watson called pseudo-science, although I think he was being positive about using the word. I love pseudo-science. Psychic powers and time travel are in the realm of sub-science, if you like, but they are also in the realm of fun, of entertainment."

"You can use time travel, psychic powers and ghosts not just as plot devices, but as tools to explore human life, the nature of ritual and dreams. In fact you can use them to look at the functioning of the human mind and the development of story. I'm interested in the origins of story, in the beginnings of our need of stories for entertainment, and you can use the actual tools of story to explore story itself. Which is what I was attempting to do in *Lavondyss*."

The impulse to tell stories himself has always been a driving force. "It's been an instinct all my life, from the moment I first staggered out of the cot. There was the Roman port of Lympné on the hillside behind my house. I have no idea how old I was – four, perhaps – when I began fantasizing about the Roman ships coming up to the harbour there. That's where Romney Marsh is now, but in Roman times it was under the sea."

"So I got my imagination at work very early, and my grandfather was a great storyteller in the real tradition. He would tell horrifying ghost stories, frightening the life out of me; not just with the stories, but with the spooky

way he used his hands and facial expressions. His stories stick with me so vividly. I loved it because he was engaging in me the same need to tell stories back. I rapidly found I couldn't tell stories aloud, but I could write them down, and at school I wrote them on sheets of paper during lessons, to pass along the row of very bored young boys listening to the chemistry master droning on."

His favourite reading at that time was *First Men in the Moon*, *The Time Machine*, *War of the Worlds* and *Dan Dare*. "I read them endlessly, and my own childhood stories were just recyclings of ideas by other writers. I wrote one when I was 10 called *The Phantom Planet*, which was about 30,000 words, and used all my family as characters."

"The spectacular demonstration of my innate scientific ability in *The Phantom Planet* is on the very first page, where an astronaut is looking through a telescope at the other side of the galaxy. At the time I thought, 'You don't see that far through telescopes. But what the hell!' So I was rather dismissive of the accuracy of science, favouring the energy of the plot. I'm afraid that's something which has been with me ever since."

His first published story appeared in *New Worlds* 184, an all-new-writers issue, in 1968. "It was a psychological breakthrough for me; the first sale after something like forty rejections from *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Analog*, *Galaxy* and many other magazines." The fee was three guineas, and he kept the cheque as a souvenir.

"The story, called 'Pauper's Plot,' is a fantasy, written in France in two weeks, and it seemed the likeliest place to sell it was *New Worlds*. But after that I never wrote anything like 'Pauper's Plot' again; I was back to traditional science fiction with the next story, 'Microcosm.' And the third story I sold, 'The Darkness,' was just a dream written-up, with absolutely no point to it whatsoever. But that story showed my interest in the supernatural, and the power of dreams to affect behaviour in life."

"So, very early on, the things that interested me, the areas I would be exploring over the next twenty-five

years, were coming up in these individual little stories; none of which have any real plot, but all of which must have had something, because they sold."

"'Pauper's Plot' was meant to be an allegory about industrialization. It has at its heart social differences, and it's terribly naive; but the allegorical aspect of it is present in *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss*. I don't believe those early stories really had any great depth, but they all have a degree of metaphor running through them. The first thing I learnt was how to tell a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, but when the stories were supported by an underlying meaning, I started to sell a little bit more."

Holdstock's first career was in medical zoology, researching aspects of immunology, yet his work has never fallen into the hard science-fiction category. "When I was younger," he recalls, "I loved *Analog* for a long time, because of the sense of detail in any story that dealt with science. But it rapidly became boring. After a while I no longer wanted a reason how, say, faster-than-light travel would work. For a time I was fascinated to read this guff, this pseudo-science about how things like an FTL engine-drive would function, then my attitude transformed completely. I just wanted them to get on with the story, and by that time in my life – I was 13 or 14 – to get on with looking at the aliens."

"I became fascinated by biological environments, with how evolution might be different on other planets, and whether or not Darwinian evolution was universal or just functioning on Earth. If there are other systems of evolution, how might they work? I experimented with this notion in *Eye Among the Blind*, in which a race begins highly advanced, sinks back through an internalized, philosophical state of being, and ends up very primitive. I thought, 'If I can get away with this, I can get away with anything.' Well I didn't."

Why not? "In *Eye Among the Blind*, I thought if I could twist evolution round so you get a reverse Darwinianism, I'd come up with an explanation for it. But the fact of the matter



was I just didn't believe my own idea.

"One of the ways I write is very much to set up a task, get an idea, and leave the unconscious – or underconscious – processes to come up with the explanations. My self-consciousness is producing words on the paper, but there's a whole process going on behind. With *Eye Among the Blind*, the little man in the back, in the underconscious, said, 'No way, José!' But it was fun to try.

come is a pattern that brings consciousness back after the trauma. I saw it as a mechanism designed to confront a huge evolutionary change, galaxy-wide, and to return the lifeform to its previous state.

"So I was playing, rather incoherently as you hear me tell it, with patterns that we hold on the cerebral cortex. But we don't know what they mean until the environmental circum-

encamp next to the wood no doubt there would be some very bizarre mythagos appearing. The wood itself has its own say in what is going to be produced out of its store of archetypes."

In this sense the Mythago concept provides him with a literary tool with which to write completely different stories. It is as flexible in its way as, for example, Philip José Farmer's



Photo of Robert Holdstock by Dick Inde

"It was even more fun with *Earthwind*. The centre of that novel is the triple spiral, a neolithic symbol you'll find all over the world. You'll find it beautifully expressed in the Irish passage graves and on old standing stones in Malta and Spain. The spiral is very intricate, and I became fascinated by the pattern. I wondered if there was something archetypal about it, if there was something about it we recognize because it is more ancient than language. My feeling is that we inherit pattern structures from our more primitive ancestral forms. All over the world you can see patterns that human cultures share in common.

"The point of *Earthwind* was that these patterns are defence mechanisms against galactic changes, and in the book a time change swept through the galaxy repeatedly. All creatures on any planet exposed to this shifting time front have to defend themselves against it. The pattern expressed when the time changes

stances trigger them. Which is something I can believe in. Or rather, I don't particularly believe in the symbols I used; I believe in the principle. Art often expresses not just the representation of an object but its relationship with the underconscious. Or the collective unconscious, if one believes in such a thing. The shared pattern recognition we have binds us all."

There is a form of shared recognition of myth, too, and he believes all legend goes back to historical truth. "That's the point of *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss*. The mythagos generated in the wood are coming from the human mind that is close to the wood, and the mind of my hero in the first book certainly had genetic and cultural influences from all over Europe, which determined the nature of his experiences. George Huxley would have been part Roman, part Greek, there would be some Nordic in him, and some Gothic. But if I had someone Chinese

*Riverworld* series. "I loved the *Riverworld* books; they were gorgeous. I wouldn't like to compare my stories with *Riverworld*, because it sounds pompous, but the similarity is that Farmer can bring in anything he wants and I can bring in anything I want. His structure is very different to mine, but consistent; my structure is consistent too, I hope, and what I have to work at as a craft writer is keeping that consistency, and not bend the rules in the process. That's very easy to do; you simply say, 'We don't know everything there is to know.'

"In a way, Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, with the sentient planet producing solid images out of the unconscious of the people on the space station, must have been working in my head when I was coming to terms with the notion of *Mythago Wood*. There's a close similarity between my idea and that idea, and if reading *Solaris* was the trigger in creating *Mythago Wood*, I don't think it matters. In fact, perhaps the



idea is far closer to *Forbidden Planet* – the first real use of Carl Jung's ideas. That was a super film. I can still watch it without laughing at the costumes.

"The influence of Jung on all writers is probably through other writers, rather than from Jung himself, who is quite difficult to understand at times. But simple ideas, such as the idea of archetypes, get into the creative mind and produce works of creation called 'stories.' So we experience Jung vicariously in a way.

"And I notice also the great passion for Joseph Campbell at the moment. Here's a man whose books, except for *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, are very difficult to read. They're wonderful tomes, full of examples that are great to dip into, but they make for an incredibly dense read. The 'hero' is very much in vogue, and Campbell himself is very much in vogue, and yet fantasy and science fiction have been dealing with Campbellian ideas, or the ideas Campbell has written about, for decades.

"I am attracted to the idea of all stories coming from one first story, that in fact there is a monomythic idea that surfaces in every writer. We all have the same belief systems deep down, we just take different routes by which we come to them. We might come to them through a canvas, through music or writing a book. We are touching something very much in common, but expressing it in different ways.

"People have a feeling of recognition when they look at art or read art. That recognition is partly the artist's personal dream, the 'little dream' you could call it, and partly the 'big dream' from which we get the archetypal characters, stories and quest motifs that inform all of literature, in different ways and to different extents."

He is anxious to stress that *Lavondyss* was not a sequel to *Mythago Wood*. "It was a further expansion of the theme. The reception to *Mythago Wood* was very good, and there were cries for a sequel. There was no way I was going to write a sequel. Nevertheless the clamour to write sequels is quite strong, and the suggestions that came in were like little bats whizzing around in my head.

"I'm a slow writer. It takes me two years to write a book, and a lot of that time will often be spent shaking off what I feel are 'outside' influences. I had to spend a year denying my inclination to follow too closely to *Mythago Wood*. *Lavondyss* kept writing itself back towards the first book, and I didn't want to do that. I had a very clear idea of what I did want to do – there was what you might call an image sound in my head – but there was too much noise from outside to really get going with *Lavondyss* for a full year.

"When I got down to writing the book it became a very demanding exer-

cise in touching my own unconscious thoughts. I was allowing a lot of ideas to surface unbidden. I would spend a week allowing one image to shape and form. The image for example of the woman transmogrified into a tree. That was very difficult to live with because it was so violent and bizarre. Where that image came from I have no idea, but I know it was coming from within me; as was the fixation with birds and bird metaphors in the second half of the novel. Out of allowing these birds to fly through the mind, and create images and links with the characters, I felt I was touching something quite primitive. I enjoyed that sensation.

"One of the nice things is, whenever you write, ideas keep coming, and flesh themselves out in your mind as you go along. So I tend not to have outlines, but I make notes. I always like to have a sense of where I'm going, although I don't like to know what I'm going towards. I don't want to know what the end of a book is. I want it to find its own way."

Is this in order to reinforce the sense of mystery for the readers? "I don't do it for that reason. I do it because if I have too much of a clear idea where I'm going, it's like a mental outline, which is an unwanted constraint. I suppose there is a craftsman in me who's always in control of that material. I didn't know the ending of *Mythago Wood* until I was writing it. I quite honestly didn't know that the father at the end of the book was in fact protecting his son rather than attacking him. Yet that revelation, which made me scream with delight when I wrote it, like so many things in the book fell into place for me."

His forthcoming collection, *The Bone Forest*, contains a further exploration of the *Mythago* motif. "The book has six of my previously published stories of the fantasy ilk; my science fiction was more or less collected in *The Valley of the Statues*," he explains. "The exception is 'The Time Beyond Age.' I put that in because it's a story I've wanted to collect for a long time. Other reprinted stories included are 'The Shapechanger,' my latest homage to Nigel Kneale, 'Thorn' and 'Scarrowfell.' The earliest story is 'Magic Man,' about a boy cave painter. It's very crude, but I think it's a nice ghost story. I don't believe the meaning of cave paintings as represented in it, but that doesn't matter. I think it works as a story.

"The little universe of invented mythology that I'm working on has references in all the stories in the collection. There is a link between them and *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss*, and the centrepiece is a new novella, 'The Bone Forest.' This returns to 1935, the period of time in *Mythago Wood* referred to in the journals of the

dead father. There were two or three references in those journals that intrigued me even at the time I wrote them. References to 'poor Jennifer,' George's wife, and how she was 'dead by her own hand'; and 'the boys,' meaning his sons, getting 'too involved with the wood.'"

At the beginning of 'The Bone Forest,' a character called the Snow Woman makes her way through deep snow on a cold winter's night to hide in the Huxleys' chicken shed, and she is watched by a small boy. "When I wrote that I was right back in my parents' house looking out at the snow-covered garden through the frosted glass. So there's an engagement with my childhood.

"A white figure on white snow is a very powerful image to me, an image that strikes deep. Why does it strike deep? I think we are all very affected by winter. Winter is the season in which the darkest side of our personalities are perilously close to emerging. There's a fascination with snow, which perhaps reaches back to our memories of a time when it was always snowing; there must have been a period of time when one was never far away from the bleakest winters. I think winter is a very effective season. The beginning of *Lavondyss* is set in the snow; the ending of *Mythago Wood* is set in snow, and the beginning of 'The Bone Forest' is set in snow. There was literally a chill in me when I wrote those sequences, and a feeling of silence and remoteness.

"When I came to write 'The Bone Forest' I didn't want to tamper too much with the mystery of *Mythago Wood*. But I thought I wouldn't be doing that if I wrote about the relationship between George Huxley and his wife. I became very intrigued to know why his wife committed suicide – it was because of his obsession almost certainly, but for other reasons too. 'The Bone Forest' is a story which dramatizes two or three pieces of Huxley's journal. His sons are beginning to experience the phenomena of the wood. He is trying to stop them questioning it. His wife is distressed. One day Huxley goes on a journey into the wood and when he comes back he brings something with him that has been dragged from a parallel world. Perhaps it's an aspect of himself. It is very frightening, primitive, highly intelligent. And brutal. The story is about him trying to understand what he has done to himself to allow this ghostly creature to come through with him. I got to the end of 26,000 words and realized it was a novel. So the novella rounds off the first phase of what is really George Huxley's exploration of his own madness. I shall finish that as a novel in a couple of years."



To his regret, Holdstock has not experienced the kind of paranormal phenomena he incorporates into his work. "I have never had a psychic experience. I've never seen a ghost, although I've desperately tried to. I can't use dowsing rods, although I grit my teeth, my brow furrows, sweat breaks out and I try. And that's the problem. I want to believe it, I want it to work. But I try too hard."

But landscape does strike a spiritual chord. "Oh God, yes. Woodland especially has an enclosing and transporting effect on me, as do most areas with stones that have been positioned deliberately, especially the Avebury area. Even despite its commercialization, Avebury still hits me somewhere very deep, especially on a foggy night. It seems to me to be existing in two time frames – four thousand years ago and today.

"The experience is a very emotional one, but it's also deeper than that. Because there is a feeling of time, a feeling of spirit, in the place; and the spirit is very much my imagination, and thinking of people who once lived there. This is what children do, of course. They create their own universes, their own fantasy landscapes. That's why I use children so much in my books; I love their perception of the world.

"I think myth or legend develops from a child listening to the accounts of the adults, and seeing things that are larger than life to them. We never throw off our childhood perspective, we just superimpose adult perception on it. Stories of giant boars and great creatures and huge knights and vast woods seem to me to be a reflection of the child's eye. So the child is very important in the man.

"I often wonder to what extent I'm channelling out my ability to have psychic experiences by imagining so much. If you are very imaginative, I suspect it's difficult to see the true

supernatural. I think the supernatural often appears to people not expecting it, or who couldn't imagine it. My grandfather, who had that wonderful and weird imagination, had no psychic experiences; my grandmother continually saw ghosts, and felt presences. When she was young she wouldn't stay in a house on Romney Marsh, one night, because there was something terrible in there. And without being aware of it, or so the family story goes, they found out there had been several murders in that house about fifty years before.

"She swore blind that when my grandfather died he came back. He just walked into the bedroom, sat down on the bed, and said, 'I'm all right.' Knowing my grandmother, she probably said, 'Oh, I'm glad to hear that.'

"The closest I've come to death myself? That might have been when a large metal container came off the back of a lorry at about sixty miles an hour, skimmed the back of my neck, and demolished the wall outside my house in Hertford. I felt absolutely nothing except the wind on my neck. I didn't feel any sense of panic, or shock or horror. I was going out for a drink at the time. I stood looking at this demolished wall then went on to the pub and had one more Carlsberg Special than I intended to. I don't have a sense of danger when there's nothing I can do about it.

"Or maybe this year [1990], in April, I was flying home from Hong Kong at about 15,000 feet and one of the engines on the plane exploded. There must have been a fifty-fifty chance of that plane going down. But it didn't. We jettisoned the fuel, came back, and landed. Most of the people on the plane were in a state of shock for two days. I was just delighted to have another two days' holiday. This makes me in a way stupid, but as I say, I don't have a sense of danger. Even when I heard the engine go – there was a huge explosion and someone shouted, 'My

God, it's on fire!' – I didn't think the plane was going to crash. There was no possibility that it was my time to go, I suppose you could say. Anyway, I hadn't finished my book for John Jarrold, so I didn't dare! But one day, when it is going to be my time, I'm going to feel it. I just know this."

Does he believe in an afterlife? "I'm keeping an open mind. I was brought up as a Catholic, and I'm fascinated by the historical aspects of Christianity. If there are such things as ghosts, if there is such a thing as communion with the dead, then perhaps there has to be an afterlife. But I don't particularly want there to be one, because I can't bear the thought of an eternity of boredom. Whereas when I was a child I couldn't bear the thought of there not being an afterlife.

"The only thing that keeps me slightly wanting an afterlife is that I'd like to be able to watch people reading my books after I'm dead, and see what they say. It seems odd to think that one day I'll die, it will all go black, the libraries will still be sending PLR to my estate, and I won't know what's being said about me. Part of me cares, you see, so I want to be able to monitor it. On the other hand I don't think I'm going to do a Malcolm Muggeridge and suddenly start to have a real need for an afterlife.

"If you want to know what I'd really like to do, I'd like to be reborn. And just occasionally – and this is the science-fiction writer talking – to be able to remember what it was like to be me."

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**Note:** Robert Holdstock is Guest of Honour at this year's Easter SF Convention, to be held in Glasgow over Easter weekend, and his new collection *The Bone Forest* will be published by Grafton Books to coincide with that event.

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## WRITE TO INTERZONE

We enjoy receiving feedback from our readers, and we hope to publish a lively letter column in each issue. Please send your comments, opinions, reactions, to the magazine's main editorial address. We may not be able to reply to all letters, but we do read them and may well be influenced by them.



# Traces

Stephen Baxter

**B**y the time we reached the comet, Dillard and I had spent fifteen months together inside the two-man GUTship; and, although we'd respected each other's privacy as far as possible, I'd come to know him as well as I've known anyone. And I believed that his Holistic faith was as well-founded as it was possible to be.

So, when his faith crumbled before the ancient images we extracted from the comet core, I was profoundly shocked.

I was the pilot of the GUTship while Dillard was the mission specialist, with special responsibility for the Berry archaeological imaging process. The ship itself looked a little like a giant parasol: a stem five hundred yards long tipped by our lifecell, a fat disc some fifty yards wide, while the "handle" of the parasol, at the other end of the stem, was a block of asteroid ice within which the GUT drive was embedded.

The lifecell was cluttered with communications banks, with living equipment such as a galley, shower and Virtual tank, and with lab equipment. Thus, much of the lifecell was of necessity common ground to Dillard and me – but it also contained two precious privacy booths into which we could retreat, with books or vision cubes, in order to make-believe we were somewhere else. We decorated the booths in styles of our own choosing – I fixed mine to match my fancy of the sailing ships of old Earth, with blackened ship's timbers, a narrow bunk and creaking floorboards (I never found out what Dillard did to his; I liked to imagine a bare stone cell containing a jug of water, a hard bed with a single blanket, and a few books – but this was whimsy: the Holistics are not renowned for their asceticism).

In any event, Dillard and I spent much of our journey in polite avoidance of each other. Ship's days would pass with scarcely a word between us, and such conversations as we had tended to centre around work.

So my journey to the Oort Cloud with a minister of the First Church of Christ the Holistic wasn't the cartoon nightmare one might imagine.

**O**ne of the few times we discussed Dillard's beliefs came at turnover. After seven months at one gee we were a sixth of a light year from Earth and travelling at three-quarters of lightspeed: just enough to tinge the receding Sol with redshift. Now we were to begin the slow deceleration to our rendezvous point in the Cloud. The GUT drive closed

down and gravity lifted from the lifecell, and Dillard and I strapped loosely into our couches. I touched a panel and the lifecell turned transparent, so that we lay in a bowl of multicoloured light, suspended amid stars. Verniers nudged the ship over so that the diamond-hard stars wheeled around us.

Dillard turned on his side and peered down through the floor. He was a stocky man, a head shorter than me, and, at forty-five, some ten years older. Now I could make out the starlit outline of his blandly handsome, blocky face.

"Brewster, look down there." I twisted to see. The ship's main stem emerged from the base of the life-system and dwindled into the distance like an exercise in perspective, finishing in the amorphous grey mass of the asteroid ice block. Dillard grinned. "That block was a perfect cube when we left the Moon."

I nodded. "Well, we've used a little less than half of it: just about on schedule. We shouldn't run out of gas until we get to the comet..."

"Let's hope we can refill as planned."

Most of our conversation was like this: gentle, delivered in the mildest of tones, and meaningless. Dillard was always calm, friendly and interested in everything; habitually he would run a hand over his greying blond crewcut and turn to me, unfailingly curious.

I felt guilty for not liking him more than I did.

We continued to consider the GUT drive. GUT stands for "Grand Unified Theory," that philosophical system which describes the fundamental forces of nature as aspects of a single superforce. The GUT drive consists of a fist-sized chunk of hydrogen locked into a superconducting bottle and bombarded to creation-physics temperatures. At such temperatures only the unified superforce can act. When the hydrogen is bled from the bottle the superforce goes through "phase transitions," decomposing into the four familiar forces of nature – strong and weak nuclear, gravitational and electromagnetic. Just as steam releases heat when it goes through a phase transition by condensing to water, so at each transition of the superforce a pulse of energy is emitted.

The GUT phase energy flashes asteroid ice to plasma; the superheated plasma is expelled through a nozzle, so that a GUTship is a kind of steam rocket.

A random impulse prompted me to observe to Dillard: "Of course it was GUT phase transition energy, liberated during the cooling period after the Big Bang, that fuelled the expansion of the universe itself."

He raised his head and studied me patiently.



I went on, tempted to needle him, "Seems almost blasphemous – doesn't it? – to put such a godlike force into a box and ride it..."

Dillard smiled. In his gentle Boston accent he said, "If we thought it was blasphemy the Church would hardly have funded the expedition."

"But I thought your faith was based on the sanctity of nature."

"It is. But that does not preclude the advance of technology. We believe that nature has been designed for the use of wise people..."

"Ah," I said. "The anthropic principle. The theory that the fundamental constants underpinning the universe were set so that human life would be possible; that even the primordial supernova, which caused the birth of the Sun, was part of some Grand Design –"

"Something like that." Dillard's face was like a sketch, with small mouth and nose, widespread eyes and barely a wrinkle; now he wore a smile that was irritatingly tolerant. "Brewster, we've spent the last seven months skirting the topic of faith, and I suspect that was the wisest path." He looked up through the clear roof; the turning manoeuvre was almost completed now, so that we were looking back the way we had come. "But I'll say this," he went on. "Blasphemy is an outdated concept. Look up, Brewster; that red-shifted blur is the Sun and, with a little wishful thinking, you can make out around it a muddy pool of light that is the inner Solar System. Earth alone holds life –"

"As far as we know."

"As far as we know after a century of assiduous research, yes – and I can cup the extent of intelligence's spread in the palm of my hand. We believe that the reduction of entropy – the encouragement of self-organization – is sacred. If we are here for any reason it is to build, to spread, to grow and learn. As yet we've built nothing. You can only blaspheme if you shout loudly enough for God to hear. We've a way to go before we achieve that."

Dillard's church had been the first to weld late twentieth-century scientific notions – such as cosmology's anthropic philosophy, the self-organization principles of the chaos scientists, Lovelock's Gaia ideas – to a subframe of simple, robust Christianity.

The new religion, I reflected, had been ideally comforting for the spiritually starved Western world – and it had spread like a virus. Science and technology suddenly became spiritually valid activities, and we walked with a swagger, confident of our pre-eminence in the universe.

Still, despite my own cynicism, I conceded that Dillard's conviction was impressive; perhaps it ought to have been inspiring, even...

But I come from Liverpool – not the Martian colony but that battered old city on the west coast of England – and my family have been lapsed Catholics for generations. So there is a scarred hole in me where faith (perhaps) ought to lie, and the conviction of others serves only to make me feel threatened. At that moment – despite the fact that underneath it all I had come to respect Dillard – I wished only to pry at his beliefs, to seek to undermine them. Yet, perhaps I was hoping that he would stand firm even so; I think somewhere inside me there was a baffled child seeking comfort from Dillard's steadfastness.

I said nothing, and the moment passed.



Illustrations by Tony Hough



At length a low bell tolled, signifying the return of gravity. With some relief I turned the hull opaque, locking out the universe.

**T**he months wore away, and at last the ship reached its greatest distance from the Sun. The relativistic tinges faded from the stars as the GUT drive sighed to stillness. I turned the hull transparent once more, and we peered out.

The comet was a grey ghost fifty miles wide, sliding along the rim of the Sun's gravity well like a bristled spectre.

This comet was one of billions in the Oort Cloud, a rough sphere a third of a light year from the Sun. Comets are balls of grubby snow; only if they fall into the depths of the Solar System does the Sun's heat cause them to blaze across the sky. But this nucleus had never fallen; since the birth of the planets – perhaps even since the primordial supernova – it had circled alone here, as undisturbed and discrete as some eyeless fish of the ocean depths.

And this isolation was precisely why we had come to visit. As Dillard had explained during the voyage, "if we're careful this comet could yield Berry phase image data from half way back to the Big Bang itself..." He had grinned, boyish. "This will knock those portraits of Caesar into a cocked hat, eh?"

The Berry phase of an electron is a quantum attribute which records the particle's history: its displacements and velocities, the forces which have acted on it... The Berry phase is the particle's memory. The effect was discovered in the 1980s, but it was not until this century that a way was found to cross-correlate the phases of a multitude of particles to reconstruct three-dimensional traces of macroscopic events...

Images of the past.

When the first Berry image was made public – a murky swampland reconstructed from a lump of coal – there was wild speculation. Perhaps, for example, you could take a core from the Notebooks and gaze into the eyes of Leonardo...

But it didn't work out like that. Earthbound particles have been handled, eaten, excreted, incorporated into bone, ground to meal, buried, burned, blasted, over and again. Trying to untangle all that is next to impossible.

By the time we left Earth only the face of Gaius Julius Caesar had emerged from the gloom of centuries, thanks to a chance isolated find in Britain.

But, still, image archaeology had caught the imagination of the world. And when Holistic Church money had started to pour into glamorous science projects, Berry phase research was a prime candidate.

So here I was, orbiting a comet in a ship mostly owned by the First Church.

Well, I wasn't complaining. As long as I was here.

We got to work. I closed down the ship's flight systems, and Dillard began to deploy the Berry phase analysis equipment. Five small probes nosed their way out of a stem-mounted cargo pod and spread themselves evenly around the comet nucleus; Dillard took particular care that the probes' vernier exhaust did not contaminate the comet surface.

Then, from each probe, electric-blue laser light lanced into the comet. Five superhot wavefronts converged at lightspeed on the dead centre of the nucleus.

A cubic centimetre of the ancient ice flashed to plasma, and the light beams carried precious Berry phase data back to the probes.

It took less than a second.

Dillard was flushed and excited; perspiration had gathered in droplets over his scalp. I couldn't help but smile. "Is that all there is to it?"

He wiped his brow, grinning. "This is where the hard work starts..."

"Call me when you find something."

**W**ith the Berry extraction complete I was free to set up the rest of our research programme. Over the next few days a hail of small robots tumbled eagerly to the comet surface, and laser and other beams scored the icescape.

At length, restless, I suited up and climbed out of the ship through the airlock; from the transparent roof of the lifecell I kicked off towards the comet nucleus. As the ship receded beneath me the lighted lifecell became a raft of incongruous normality, adrift in a bottomless sea.

I turned myself over and descended feet first towards the comet.

Spires and needles of ice hundreds of feet high bristled menacingly towards me. It was like falling into some cartoon mountain range. As I passed one triple-edged peak I reached out a gloved hand, cautiously; the substance of the peak evaporated within my grasp, less substantial than candyfloss.

These fantastic structures had condensed here thanks to a stillness lasting billions of years; but one trip around the Sun would wipe this nucleus clean.

I landed and – with a hiss transmitted through my suit – I sank to about knee depth in insubstantial gossamer. I found I could walk about with little difficulty, and my motion jumbled the ice into new, precarious sculptures. I walked in a faery city worked in silver and ebony, laced with threads of purplish organic compounds. Arches of feathery ice twisted over my head, seeming to defy even the microgravity of this place.

A movement to my left caught my eye: a fist-sized sample robot clambered busily out of the interior of the comet, its tiny caterpillar treads spinning. For a few seconds it lay as if resting, surrounded by a crater of disturbed ice; then it retracted its treads, sprouted a tiny rocket nozzle, and set off towards the GUTship, leaving me alone with the antique stillness.

I let my heart open up. Moments like this, I suspected, were why I endured the pain, loneliness and boredom of deep space flight; moments like this gave my life its meaning and definition; moments like this were as close as I would ever come to the numinous.

My helmet radio hissed to life. "Brewster." Dillard's voice sounded flat. "You'd better come back."

I frowned, my mood broken. "What is it?"

"...I've found something."

He would say no more. With a growing sense of unease I kicked off from the surface of the comet, careless now of the ice sculptures I shattered.

**D**illard had extracted a sequence of Berry phase images from the comet core material. When I joined him he was cycling them through his workbench.



I was stunned.

There was a star – not Sol, but a monster: huge, brooding and blighted by vast spots. A clutch of planets showed as discs and crescents.

"These are good quality traces," Dillard said, his voice tight. "And remember that a Berry image is like an animated hologram, containing depth and time information; there's so much data here that –"

I touched his shoulder. "Dillard, you don't need to lecture me. These images are – magical."

Dillard seemed to take comfort from my impressed reaction, and some of his customary bland composure returned. Underneath, though, I sensed a deep disturbance which I could not understand; hesitant expressions chased across his face.

The stellar system shifted across the screen as the imaging process panned over prehistory. At length the "camera" selected one of the planets, a ruddy crescent off to the left of the huge star, and zoomed in. I stared at the picture, willing myself to make out surface details; but as the planet image grew it continually shattered into boxes of uniform colour which only hesitantly reformed. Dillard explained that we were close to the process's limit of resolution.

The crescent settled at the centre of the workbench, distinctly red and tipped by small icecaps.

There were stars within the horns of the crescent.

I stared stupidly, shaking my head.

"Cities, on the nightside," Dillard said calmly.

"Cities?"

"Watch." For a moment I studied him: his broad face remained blank and his shoulders were hunched as he worked the workbench controls. His reaction continued to strike me as odd, but my excitement at the Berry traces was overwhelming, and I turned once more to the images.

Now more details trickled through the frosted-glass imaging process. A little above the world's surface I made out sections of arcs; it was rather as if the planet image had been sketched hastily and was surrounded by remains of earlier drafts. At first I speculated that the world was ringed; but the truth, as it emerged, was far stranger: a Net of light surrounded the planet, a wide mesh like a longitude-latitude grid. Beads of green and brown slid along the Net, here and there dropping to the surface through the thin layer of air.

Now a ship dropped gracefully into the image, a slim cylinder of startling blue; it slid through the Net and settled towards the planet surface. It was difficult to be sure of the scale – but the ship looked so vast that its keel must have been bent to match the curve of the world.

The image faded, leaving the workbench empty.

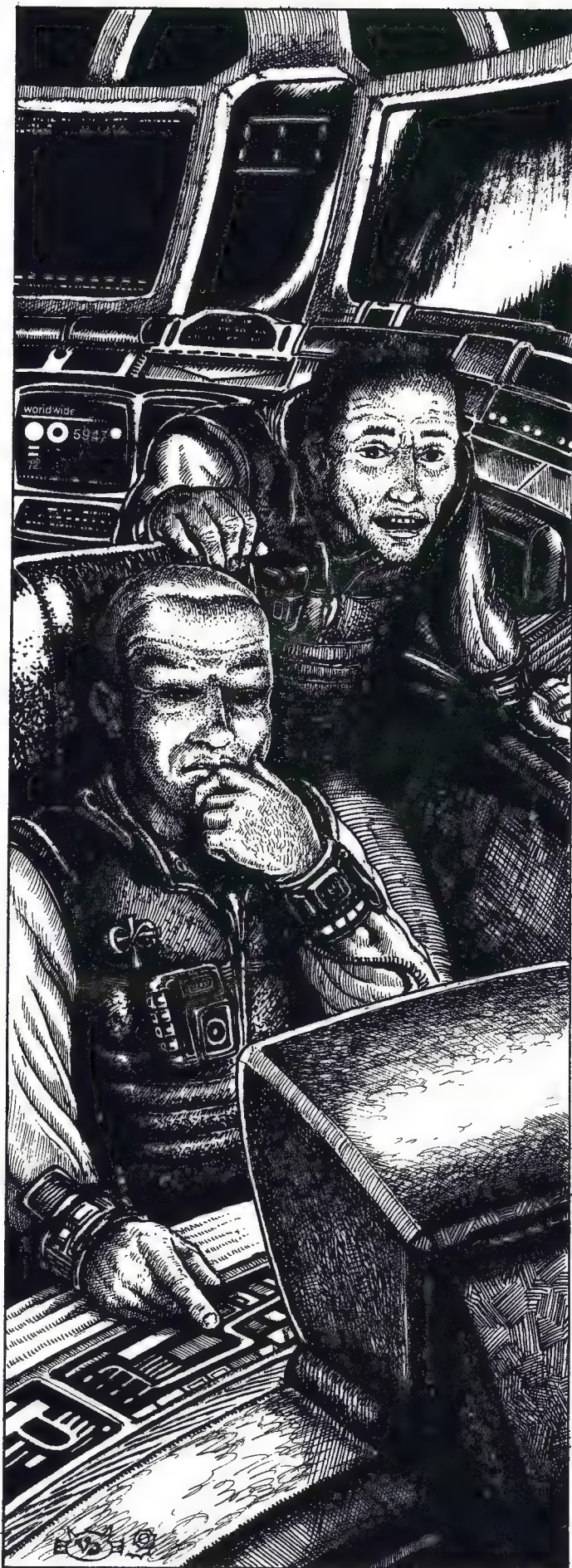
I reached behind me, found a couch, and pulled myself into it. "Dillard, man; I don't know what to say."

He spread his wide hands flat on the workbench.

I said, "This is a triumph. More than we could have expected. This is – the discovery of the age! The first evidence of life, intelligence beyond Earth. So we're not alone –"

"But we are." There was an edge in his voice and again I caught the impression of some deep distress. "These images are more than five billion years old."

"But there may be other traces of their passing." Suddenly my overworked imagination was full of





images of a new Renaissance, as GUTships scoured the Oort Cloud for the wisdom of a lost race –

"No. Brewster, you've had some astrophysical training; think it through. What did you make of that star? Was it a quiet little main-sequence star like Sol?"

I remembered the star: massive, swollen even, with those deep spots racing across its surface –

Dillard mused, "Already they must have been preparing for the betrayal of their star. Perhaps they moved their cities underground, or erected force fields. Perhaps they were even planning to move their worlds."

"The star is going to supernova," I breathed.

"Wrong. It did supernova. Five billion years ago."

I felt a great sadness settle over me. "So we've lost them." My head seemed to clear as my wilder imaginings evaporated. Dillard still drifted over his workbench, his labourer's hands spread flat against its empty surface. "Dillard, forgive me," I said. "I still can't understand the way you're taking this. To extract this data is a great achievement. Why is it distressing you so?"

He turned away, his face working. "I'm going to take a break. Excuse me. There isn't much more I can do with the facilities here in any event; when we get back to Earth I will be able to extend the range of the Berry images forwards and backwards in time – maybe all the way up to the explosion itself –"

I said harshly, "Dillard, your faith has taken a dent today, hasn't it? Is that the problem? Your Church is based on the premise that the universe was designed for man; and that therefore we are alone. Its mass appeal is based on that anthropocentric element. Yet today you have found proof that another race existed."

"Brewster –"

"But you're a scientist, man. Surely you can rise above this. The old Christian churches had to absorb Darwin's ideas; if your faith is strong enough it will survive –"

"Brewster." His voice was hard and his hands had gathered into fists. "Please don't lecture me on matters you don't understand."

And he pulled himself away from the bench and into his privacy booth.

I stared after him.

And, at length, I began to work it out.

Dillard's faith had been more than damaged. It had been destroyed.

The Berry process had shown us another race building cities, sailing between planets. Perhaps they too had evolved some equivalent of our anthropic theory, by which they also believed the universe had been built as a sort of racial adventure playground for them.

But their sun had exploded, and their worlds were put to fire.

Perhaps Dillard's faith could have survived even these blows, but there was more.

For this comet was a relic of the birth of the Solar System, of the great compressive wave which had crossed this region of space and sparked into existence the Sun and a host of other stars...

A wave emanating from a supernova.

Today Dillard and I had seen the star which had exploded so that Earth, and human life, could be born; and so our very substance was composed of the blasted

carcasses of that lost race. Just as we, one day, would die so that some other people, fantastically different, could arise – another race to believe, fondly and foolishly, that the universe was designed for them alone.

Anthropocentrism was dead.

Dillard's church would probably survive, I reflected, even with its anthropic heart ripped out; the cynicism of its wealthy leaders would see to that. But Dillard was an intelligent and honest man, and now he would have to come to terms with this amputation of his philosophy.

As would I. I grieved – not for Dillard, but for my confused self, left once more without even the faith of others for comfort.

Clumsily I made the workbench replay the Berry traces, over and again.

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**Stephen Baxter** last appeared here with "Vacuum Diagrams" (IZ 35). He has recently completed a novel, *Raft* (expanded from his short story of the same title in IZ 31), and a novella, "The Baryonic Lords" (the climactic story in his "Xeelee" series). The novel will appear from Grafton Books this summer, to be followed by two more contracted volumes at later dates. Steve lives with his wife near High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

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# Jamais Vu

Geoffrey A. Landis

Something distracts you – a noise, perhaps a branch tapping against a window – and when you look back you suddenly don't know where you are. Everything seems strange; you can't, for a moment, even remember what it was you were doing just a second ago.

And then everything snaps back into place. You are sitting in your own living room, in your favourite chair, and you chuckle to think how a place so familiar could seem strange, even for a moment. The French have a word for this experience, you think: *jamais vu*, the opposite of *déjà vu*.

A cup of coffee sits by your elbow, and sunlight is streaming in the window. It must be morning; you had better get hustling or you'll be late for work. You begin to stand up, then, with a sudden start, remember that you don't have to. The company you used to work for had been bought out by a conglomerate – was it really only last week? You were one of the whiz-kids in research and development, but the conglomerate sold off the company's assets, and the whole R&D division was cut back. Your department, biology and pharmaceuticals, was shut down completely. Not that it was a loss to you personally. They'd let you go with a golden handshake, a separation settlement large enough to ensure that, if you wanted, you need never work again.

The day stretches out ahead of you, free and clear. There is nothing you have to do, no place you have to be. You are free of the tyranny of the timeclock.

And then, just as you start to relax, you realize there is nothing you particularly want to do, either. Remember? Your long-time lover walked away last month; the parting was cordial, but irrevocable. The idea of pick-ups and singles bars always did nauseate you, and your old friends are scattered far away. You settle back, confused and puzzled.

Your eyes drop down to the table, and you see the book. You smile. Things are not all bad. The book is a new one by your favourite author. The book you'd heard so much about, but hadn't had time to read because your job kept you so busy. A *Sky of Shattered Diamonds*. Now you have time for it. The cover is worn; somehow you must have found a copy in the used book store. You sit down and flip it open. In an instant you're swept away.

The insistent ringing of the doorbell interrupts you. You come out of the novel slowly, reluctant to give up the vivid world of *Diamonds*. Your mind is still reeling from the book. The wonder

of it, the incredible panorama of experience! What an adventure!

You are struck by the blast of cold air as you open the door. Wasn't it just spring? But there is snow on the ground. Peculiar how time flies when you're not paying attention.

At the door is a pizza delivery boy, shivering slightly in the cold. He's come to the wrong house; you didn't order a pizza. But the name on the order slip is yours, and the pizza has all your favourite toppings. Suddenly you realize how hungry you are and just how good that pizza smells. You start to search for money to pay him, but the delivery boy smiles and says it's on your account.

You'd like to read as you eat, but hold yourself back. You want to stretch out the book as long as you can, savour it like a fine wine, rolling it over on your tongue. You wish the book, and the afternoon you'll spend reading it, would never end.

Instead, while eating you think back on your research. Your team was hot on the trail of a cure for Alzheimer's disease; another year and you might have had it. You'd mapped out the degradation mechanism, a subtle depolarization of the neural fibres; last week your team completed tests on a drug that would mimic the symptoms in chimpanzees. Now your cure will never be developed. These days there is no profit in developing new drugs; the time and expense of FDA approval and the potential for devastating lawsuits are far too high for any risk-conscious executive.

You shake your head at the folly of it all, eat the last piece of pizza, and return to a brighter, more vivid world.

It's evening by the time you finish. Tears stream down your cheeks, and your breath comes in short gasps. You're emotionally exhausted. Books like this are what makes life worth living. The book calls for a celebration, so you decide to go out for a steak dinner. You eat slowly, still half immersed in the intense reality of *Shattered Diamonds*. You head home feeling fat and satisfied. If only every day could be like this!

A tear leaks out of your eye. You'll reread it, of course, over and over, but never again with quite the same intensity or joy of discovery as today.

After dinner you go jogging, stretch your muscles after a long day. The wintry air feels good against your skin. When you get back, you head for the fridge. Ahead of you stretches the world of reality, day after pointless day, made even dimmer seen in the after-



glow of *Diamonds*. But, today, nothing can shatter your good spirits.

In the refrigerator there is nothing to drink. It is packed from front to back with vials of clear fluid. They're quite familiar; you must have taken them from work your last day (funny you don't remember your last day of work – you'd think you ought to remember that). You look around, and, yes, there are the syringes. By the syringes is a notepad. In slightly faded felt-tip ink is a note in your own handwriting: "twenty-four hours: 0.41 cc."

The drug is familiar, yes. The one you helped develop, the one that creates one of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, selective removal of recent memory. What else could it be?

You pick up the phone to place the pizza order for tomorrow. When you hear the voice answer, you can faintly hear him shout to someone in the background "the usual."

All in all, you can't think of a thing you'd want to change.

How long had it been? A year? A decade? It doesn't matter. You make the injection and lie down to sleep, dreaming of shattered diamonds.

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**Geoffrey A. Landis** won a 1990 Nebula Award for his short story "Ripples in the Dirac Sea" (*Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*, 1989). He lives in Brook Park, Ohio, and the above short-short represents his first appearance in *Interzone*.

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Please, when you send *Interzone* a change-of-address notification remember to inform us what it is for (and, if you're a subscriber, please try to inform us which issue your sub expires with – the number should follow your name on your mailing label).

The reason we ask this is that we are now running two magazines from *Iz*'s address; also, persons who submit stories (but are not subscribers) are sometimes in the habit of sending us address changes without telling us that they refer to manuscript submissions. Thus confusions arise, and we waste time searching for non-existent records in the subscription files.

It would also be helpful if you could remind us of your old address as well as the new one.

## BACK-ISSUE CLEARANCE SALE!

Issues 1, 5 and 7 of *Interzone* have long been out of print. Recently, issue 17 has run out – and some other numbers are also in short supply. However, we still have an abundance of certain other issues, including some surprisingly early ones. Now, in order to make space for newer magazines, we're having a clear-out of excess stocks. Between now and 1st July 1991, the following back issues are available to inland readers at **just £1 each** (postage included):

Number 2, Summer 1982 – stories by J. G. Ballard, Rachel Pollack, Alex Stewart (his debut) and Andrew Weiner, plus Tom Disch's tribute to the late Philip K. Dick.

Number 3, Autumn 1982 – stories by Nicholas Allan, Angela Carter, David Garnett, Garry Kilworth and Josephine Saxton, plus letters from Michael Moorcock and others.

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Number 14, Winter 1985/86 – stories by Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, Bruce Sterling, Sue Thomason, Ian Watson and David Zindell, plus a Clive Barker interview and Sterling article.

Number 15, Spring 1986 – stories by John Brosnan, William Gibson, Garry Kilworth, Diana Reed and Steven Widdowson, plus a Bruce Sterling interview, Mary Gentle reviews, etc.

Number 25, Sept/Oct 1988 – stories by Christopher Burns, Peter Garratt, Nicola Griffith, David Langford, Paul Preuss and Ian Watson, plus a Terry Pratchett interview, Tom Disch on Whitley Strieber and much more. Our first bimonthly issue.

Number 26, Nov/Dec 1988 – stories by Susan Beeston (her debut), Johnny Black, Eric Brown, Terry Pratchett, Bob Shaw, John Sladek and Charles Stross, plus a Leigh Kennedy interview, Christopher Priest article, etc.

Number 27, Jan/Feb 1989 – stories by Yoshio Aramaki, Barrington Bayley, John Brosnan, Ian Lee (his debut for us), Kim Stanley Robinson and Bob Shaw, plus J. G. Ballard on his favourite sf movies, Kathy Acker and Brian Stableford interviews and more.

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# Mutant Popcorn

Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

I think it's time for the truth about the international Jewish conspiracy. Oh yes, go ahead and laugh; they laughed at Keaton, &c., &c. But there is one, right under our noses, and it has nothing particularly to do with international capitalism, secret political cabals, or the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Yet it's being quite literally beamed into our homes, reprogramming our thoughts every time we watch an imported sitcom or a segment of *LA Law*, and it's all over the movie theatres like a creeping brain fungus consuming all it touches. Whole communities have succumbed across America, and spore clusters are already forming on the maps of Paris and London. Soon all of western Europe may fall to the deadly sludge, with only isolated pockets of immunity in remote parts of Norway and (of course) Scotland. Frankly, I fear for our civilization.

And the instrument of control? it's the therapy model of plot. You've seen it a thousand times. It's there in every film where a character (usually male: a giveaway) confronts his fear, or hugs his father, or drags out some cringingly gratuitous childhood memory, or makes his peace with the past, or tells some repugnant squit of a kid he loves it. In the more shameless cases they'll actually do this to a therapist character, but it's nowadays quite normal to bypass the formal process and cut straight to the ick scene. The one constant principle is that characters' problems are rooted in the individual's past trauma, and can be resolved by coming to terms with their assorted weedy neuroses and tedious molehills of guilt.

Now, I don't think it's terrifically tendentious to say this is a distinctively Jewish American plot type, and arises from the prominence of therapy in the cultural group that happens to dominate the entertainment, and particularly the screenwriting, industry. It certainly seems to have become orthodoxy in screenwriting courses up and down the nation's colleges that films are about individuals going through personal crises that bring them to a better understanding of themselves. Well, maybe this is my north-of-border upbringing speaking, but it seems to me there are two things

wrong with this formula as a recipe for interesting entertainment. First, it's a whole lot more interesting to people in therapy than to the presumably wide majority who find all this confessional narcissism contrived and vaguely embarrassing; second, it's really not terribly entertaining compared with (say) getting a press release from Warner's in one of their envelopes with the triboluminescent glue, or discovering over Christmas that if you try to read "Santa" upside down it comes out as "Satan." In fact, it's one of the surest formulae around for totally wrecking a really brilled-out initial movie concept.

Take all these stiff movies. Now, this is neither a humorous nor a tasteful think to remark, but I write at a time when a considerable slice out of the key English-language movie-going ageband faces imminent bodily dissolution in the desert, and very possibly by the time you read this it will have come to pass. And it just struck me as one sad irony among many that the last religious text many of those people will have consumed will have been *Ghost*, *Flatliners*, or one of their innumerable eschatological satellites. When there's so much else to feel gutted about, this probably doesn't sound a big deal. But whatever 1990 meant for the global game, in movies it was the year of five all-conquering things: really idiotic superheroes; totally cool guys in suits shooting one another to jello; too, too kissable Julia Roberts, even more kissable Kevin Bacon; and, far ahead of all, the great American dead people picture show.

In past years, afterlife movies have been kept within scrupulously silly genre confines of horror and comedy. But suddenly here's all this stuff posing as serious speculation on the world to come, and asking its audiences to give their emotional assent to scenarios of the terminal that abdicate any aspiration to irony, allegory, or other figurative distance. And it's just goo. It's happy lights and candyfloss clouds for the good persons, and Mike Jittlov in a Disney devilsuit for the punks. Despite the (on surface) resolutely agnostic and non-sectarian afterworlds in all these pictures, Hollywood pop morality has clearly colonized the

higher planes: notice how, for instance, in *Ghost* you go to hell for computer fraud but heaven for beating people up and hounding them to lurid and improbable deaths. But above all, you have to settle with your past, tell people you love them, and go through a process of painful personal growth before you're ready for the pearly elevator to beam you up. It's so transparent. Even after death, there's communicative caring and saying yes to pain.

The difference between the rest of the pack and *Flatliners*, apart from all those kissables in the cast, is that *Flatliners* at least sets out from a different tradition altogether: the literary sf tradition of Silverberg's *Recalled to Life* or Watson's *Deathhunter*, where exploration of the NDE is a Shelleyan odyssey beyond the barriers that segregate science from God. The sheer quality of concept in the seed scenario beats anything else in a genre movie all year, and until about halfway in it's possible to believe they're really going to cut free and lift from the strings of Hollywood tack. There are moments of early doubt when fanatical scienceboy Kiefer is converted by a few copter shots of Himalayas and dogs bounding through cornfields. But rescue arrives when it starts to appear that the afterlife is treacle spread thinly over brimstone: that Julia Roberts has been going round the cancer wards telling dying old ladies that they're going to "a good place" and all they have to do is make sure they've told everyone they love them, when in fact it's all a horrible hoax and they're all going to burn in hell forever. It's going to be like the afterlife glimpsed at the end of Wells's "A Dream of Armageddon": "Nightmares, I tell you, nightmares! Great birds that fought and tore..."

Except it's not. The brimstone layer turns out to be just the crust, and beneath is a superdense core of even purer treacle. Just when the plot's about to soar away free from its earthly ties, somebody jump-starts its Hollywood heart with a fistful of kilovolts, and the plot crashes back into a peculiarly exhausting working-out of the therapy model. Each character is allotted one (1) shadow from the past, invariably centred on childhood sins





Yes, it's yet another picture of those *Mutant Ninja Turtles*

and traumas, with which they are obliged to make their peace; and even crazy-eyed junior mad scientist Kiefer turns out to be redeemable by the healing power of humbug. The deathbed turns out just another version of the movie therapist's couch, and everyone gets up with their petty crimes cured to realize their total human potential. We shouldn't judge harshly: the concept's still great even if it's clear nobody had a clue what to do with it, the fabulous gothic production design is the most pointlessly gorgeous in months, and the kissable people correctly get off with one another. And yet, for a while there, it really looked like a higher plane altogether.

Superheroes, on the other hand, might not seem such suitable cases for treatment. But even in comics it's a venerable "realistic" motif that the kinds of people who dress up in strange outfits and wage moral vendettas of violence against criminal hordes are likely to be a couple of triangles short of a Toblerone. And part of the *Batman* movie legacy is that totally preposterous characters with a fractal dimension somewhere below 1.8 can be made speciously interesting by the simple conceit that they got that way as a result of personal trauma. Standard model A is the old loved-ones-whacked-by-street-undesirables routine, which comes as a package with a medium-gauge prefab revenge plot. Its main rival is model B, the traumatic-accident-with-the-radioactive-acid-bath scenario, retailing in an attractive presentation case with free improbable superpowers. But why choose, when you can have the super all-in-one action pack combining both, as used in *Darkman* (bad guys blow lab, kill

lovable ethnic assistant, leave hero for dead but actually endowed with amazing physical powers, hideous scars, and insatiable thirst for vengeance) and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (bad guy kills master, drops pet in radioactive sewer sludge where he can raise clutch of irresistible cartoon heroes to take out villain and endow worldwide merchandising empire)?

For about three reasons, I felt *Darkman* was fairly wonderful while *Turtles* was rather poor. First, I'm over seven, so not a natural member of the community to whom the Turtles primarily speak – though that doesn't mean to say we've a right to get cynical about an institution that certainly plays at least as powerful a role in the culture and imagination of current seven-year-olds as *Thunderbirds* did in ours. Second, aside from a lingering affection for *Ninja III: The Possession*, all western martial arts stunt movies are insultingly sub-standard compared with what's currently coming out of the east, whereas Sam Raimi could still teach Tsui Hark a thing or two about daft routines featuring Irishmen with dissolving heads. But above all, *Darkman* just hasn't its heart, despite the odd gesture of trying, in the feeble old therapy-plot wittering about the hero's attempts to come to terms with his mutilation and the awkward effect of his plastic face on his long-term relationship. None of this new age twerping about channelling your anger so your ninja powers can develop their full potential: let's crash some copters and throw the heroine off a ninetieth floor. Now that's what I call the pathway to personal growth.

(Nick Lowe)

# Tube Corn

TV Reviews by  
Wendy Bradley

Creating a television or film adaptation of a well known and well loved novel is a thankless task. Anyone who loves a novel already knows what it should look like and sound like; they will have cast, designed, produced and directed it in their head and will not be satisfied by anything less than a perfect correspondence with their mental image. And of course no two readers will have produced the same mental images and so the task is not only thankless but impossible.

Why bother then? Especially when there is so much original material out there waiting for a break?

Firstly because there is a ready-made market for the adaptation in all the people who love the book. The trade-off between the two media is an important source of viewers for the adaptation, just as the adaptation will be an important new source of readers for the book.

Secondly because it is easier to adapt than to produce original material; the market at which one is aiming is easier to gauge and has already been market-tested and there is no question over the potential popularity of the material.

The third and most important reason can, of course, be love. It is a fortunate author whose work is adapted for film or television by someone who is skilled in the task and who undertakes it for sheer love of the original material and a desire to make it more widely available.

It seemed at first that C. S. Lewis had been fortunate in the team appointed by the BBC to produce his classic children's fantasy books, the *Narnia* chronicles, for television; Paul Stone, the producer, also produced the well-liked *Box of Delights* and the same writer, Alan Seymour, worked on the dramatizations. The eighteen half-hour episodes in three series of six have covered first *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, next its sequel *Prince Caspian* which was in many ways the most disappointing adaptation as it was condensed into virtually a prologue to *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Now we have the 1990/91 Christmas series *The Silver Chair*, all under the umbrella title of "The Chronicles of Narnia." The programmes have been broadcast at peak viewing time for children on the peak channel and heavily hyped; the first two series are already out as videos and were plugged at the end of each of *The*



*Silver Chair* episodes. The cost of making the programmes, seven million pounds in total for the three series, compares well with the average cost of television drama in the same period (although of course it is hardly a drop in the ocean beside the pounds poured into movies). But the adult audience seems united in dislike while the child audience I have sampled is evenly split between the utterly gobsmacked and the entirely indifferent.

One correspondent, eight, was led to C.S. Lewis's work by the dramatization of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and has now read all of the seven Narnia books. I asked her how she liked *The Silver Chair* and she was enthralled by it, even though she recognized and regretted that it was not true to the text. Another, eleven, told me that she would much rather read the books since the television programmes prevented you using your own imagination. She also commented on the lack of detail in the adaptation, particularly the lack of the friendly narrating voice of Lewis.

A five-year-old was clear that it was good; most of the special effects delighted him although even he recognized there was something less than successful about the talking animals, particularly Glimfeather and the other owls in the first episode: the owls were "funny," he thought, but they were still "good," he was still willing to suspend his disbelief. In general it seems that children who have never read the books tend to be enthralled, while children who have read them are as dismayed as adults by the departures from the texts. However there is now a generation of children who have been led to read the books by first seeing them dramatized and they, even if they have now finished all the books and not just the ones already dramatized, are quite happy to accept the television programmes, I would guess because their mental image of the stories is irrevocably coloured by the television images with which they were first presented. Is there a whole generation who will think of Aslan as a kind of superior Lenny the Lion? Sad.

**T**he BBC argue that *The Silver Chair* was "true to the intention" of the original novel yet the episodic structure imposed false climaxes on the story. At the end of the first episode we were left with the heroine Jill screaming as she and Eustace were faced with thousands of eyes shining

in the darkness. They were at the meeting place of the parliament of the owls and the eyes were simply the eyes of the waiting owls: the screaming made a crisis out of a drama, ending the episode as if it were ending a cliffhanging melodrama. Similarly, episode two left Puddleglum the marshwiggie (played by Tom Baker as Marvin the Paranoid Android dressed as Worzel Gummidge) apparently hit by a rock thrown by giants and in this instance was not only a false climax – it was his boot sticking out from under the rock; he himself was immediately seen in the next episode to be unharmed – but the incident does not appear in the novel at all and its inclusion in the dramatization seemed curiously pointless.

The chromakey special effects (and those owl suits!) meant that, with the best will in the world, the series looked cheap. There were some unimaginative uses of even the relatively simple special effects employed; for example when the characters were in the giants' castle there were some effective shots superimposing the child actors filmed at a distance and the adult "giants" filmed in close up; but then the effect was undercut by a shot of the giant audience chamber from way up in the rafters which reduced human, marshwiggie and giant alike to foreshortened distance. There never seemed to be any attempt, unlike in *The Box of Delights*, to catch the flavour of the magic contained in the novels. Aslan is an allegorical god as well as a worker of magic, and yet if you had only seen him on TV you could be forgiven for thinking he was simply a performing animal with a gruff voice.

**M**aid Marian and Her Merry Men is similarly aimed at children, similarly deals with familiar fantasy characters and is visually much cheaper to look at than Narnia. Yet this is original material designed for television and combines witty use of anachronism and verse to put a genuinely new, fresh slant on the familiar tales. In this incarnation Maid Marian is the brains of the outfit and Robin is Robin of Kensington, a wimp who somehow manages to steal all the credit for her brilliant plans. The actors sell the plot as though they are a gang of schoolkids themselves and the Sheriff of Nottingham, played by Tony Robinson who also wrote the series, is a weedy school bully backed up by henchmen of remarkable stupidity.

When I was teaching ancient Greek theatre (don't ask) I used to get a lot of mileage out of a video of Peter Hall and Tony Harrison's *Oresteia*, the National Theatre company's extraordinary production of Harrison's Aeschylus translation. There was a documentary where some of the actors explained how they felt about wearing full-face masks and speaking in verse to a rhythmic accompaniment, how brilliant Harrison's translation was, what a pleasure the muscular verse was to work with, how easily it tripped off the tongue. After a couple of years new batches of students would stop listening at one point in the film and all cry "that's Baldrick!" Tony Robinson, Blackadder's Baldrick, was in the *Oresteia* and is the writer of *Maid Marian*, and I would guess there must be some connection with his experiences in the National Theatre and his use of verse, here in the form of rap-type songs which comment on or take forward the action.

The use of verse in this children's programme is exemplary; funny, memorable, strong. I used to say if Shakespeare were alive today, populist that he was, he would be writing scripts for *Coronation Street*; the more I think about it the more I think he would actually be appearing at the National Theatre, playing sidekicks in comedy and writing *Marian and Her Merry Men*. Fortunately the schedulers have for once got it right, repeating *Marian* on Sunday mornings for grown-ups without videos, and BBC Enterprises too have issued some of these early programmes on video alongside the Narnia Chronicles. I leave you to guess which of the two I shall be buying as children's birthday presents this year.

(Wendy Bradley)

## BACK ISSUES

Back issues of *Interzone* are still readily available (except for issues 1, 5, 7 and 17). They cost £2.30 each inland (postage included), or £2.50 each overseas (USA: \$4 sea mail). However, UK purchasers who buy three or more in one order may have them at £1.95 each (i.e. post free).



# Cabarets and Talking Heads

Simon Ings

**F**or the novelist and critic Colin Greenland, science fiction and fantasy's fraternity of editors, distributors, critics and readers is a central attraction of those genres. "Think of it – a body of readers who organize themselves to discuss science fiction, who run huge parties in hotels, who invite their favourite writers from all over the world along to talk about their work; where else in the literary world does that happen?"

Writers' praise for fandom is rarely unreserved, but it is sincere. Ian Watson praises its resemblance to a global family; Geoff Ryman, whose book *The Child Garden* won the 1990 Arthur C. Clarke Award, says that involvement in fandom helped educate him as a writer.

Certainly, we are lucky in Britain to have venues which bring authors and fans together on friendly terms; not so the United States, where sf conventions are not so much huge parties as business meetings where, to quote Bruce Sterling, "you go into the Science Fiction Writers of America suite and you see these middle-aged guys spilling beer on their hush puppies and all they talk about is their fucking advances."

The very informality of British venues, however, leads to problems. The main difficulty for the writers is, just what kind of relationship do they share with their fans?

**F**irst, let us be quite clear on what the business expects from writers: that they should be prepared to wait years for their work to see print and then, when it's published, orgasm politely over their by now out-dated creation on forgettable local radio stations for a period not exceeding two weeks. Or less. By which time their books, which have a shelf-life equal to that of unchilled *dolcelatte*, are taken off the shelves and "pulped" (which is a publisher's term meaning "we sold them to bargain book shops without telling you").

Writers who move from genre work to literary work are discouraged or more often shot. Writers on gay themes are told to write about bisexuals instead "because of the American market." They are told to write down to their audience. (Last year I was told by

a British sf editor – not mine, thank God – that science fiction was "pure mass market escapism.")

Somewhere in this stygian marsh of inefficiency, stupidity and plain greed there exist small bands of people who are genuinely interested in sf – and Mr Greenland is right, sf writers need these people, because they and they alone prevent writers of (dammit) quality from being drowned out by the hacks who write *Fire on the Border* and *The Far Stars War* for an "ideal audience" of fourteen-year-old yankees. Fans make some of the better editors, they read for publishing houses, they distribute the books. They are the lifeblood of the industry.

I cannot therefore be the only writer who has rushed into their first convention hotel almost weeping for joy that there is such a thing as fandom. Nor am I alone in my bitter disappointment at the lack of real communication taking place at such occasions. I don't blame anyone for this, rather I believe that there is a tightrope writers must walk at such gatherings: between leaning perpetually against the bar "just like one of the lads," and behaving in some self-consciously "literary" fashion. Just what do the fans prefer? Round-buyers or talking heads?

**F**or myself, I believe a writer has a duty to the audience to be a writer – it is as writers, after all, that we are invited to participate in this fannish world. Greenland claims to the contrary that to eschew the bar-side gossip and communicate in a purely writerly way marginalizes us – it puts the opinions we want to voice at a fatal remove from the audience. But a likely outcome of this philosophy is, as I see it, for the writer to be identified as "just a fan," and this is not only patronizing, but it also ignores why writers get invited to these venues in the first place – because they are writers.

It is no new observation that writers are "just like everyone else," and I fail to see why we should hammer home this trivial message when instead we could be giving value for all the money and enthusiasm invested in us.

This argument no doubt contains seeds of its own refutation, and it would be a pity if there were not some response made to it in a future issue of

*Interzone*. What I am more concerned with here is to suggest ways in which the whole problem can be sidestepped; ways in which writers can at once preserve what M. John Harrison has called their "necessary authority" and at the same time work with their audience – in this case sf fans – on equal terms.

First let us accept that, in the present state of things, the closest a writer and their audience ever come to sharing lasting common experience is when the audience is in the act of reading the works of the writer. Any fan who has drawn more lasting understanding of the human condition from drinking with a writer than from reading the writer's books is reading the wrong books (either that, or I'd like to know the name of the whisky). Convention organizers must therefore work with the writers to create an atmosphere as aesthetically rewarding as the act of reading, or else there is no point paying for the writers to be there. They should do anything and everything possible to give their conventions a sense of noise, fluidity and movement. They should, most of all, create of themselves an alien territory.

**A**nd here, of course, we find ourselves on new but familiar ground – theatre.

When writers become performers, the audience will participate in the creative act itself. So on the one hand, writers will learn that they cannot afford to disdain their audience; on the other, an audience addressed so directly will be disinclined afterwards to put their writers on a pedestal and ignore them.

Remember that in our culture, it is the performers who get their personal and political messages across, not the writers. (Everyone remembers how Michael Cashman spoke out against the anti-gay Clause 28, but who now remembers Angela Carter's activities?) Let the writers quit beating their breasts, then, and learn to perform.

Sf theatre is not a new development, but there has rarely been as much interest in it in years past as there will be in the near future. Brian Aldiss's touring show *Science Fiction Blues* was a small step in the right direction: it established the reading as an event in itself, and showed that it could be



more than just another marketing freebie to help launch a particular book.

Geoff Ryman, recently returned from New York, has praised the way readings in that city are treated by audience and writers alike as performances. He has suggested that a season of readings along the same lines might be organized in London.

Ryman's dramatic credentials are worth mentioning here. Take particular note of the venues. He has written and performed a dramatization of Philip Dick's *Transmigration of Timothy Archer* at the 1984 Mexican, *Disappearing Acts*, a play based on the work of Alfred Bester, at *Conspiracy* in 1987, and *Gilgamesh* at 1989's *Novacon*. So conventions are not averse to making alien territory out of themselves – what we need to do is encourage more people to do this more of the time.

**S**ome advertisements for you:

*Reconnaissance* is a new convention whose theme is "new work and new ideas in science fiction." It will take place at the Park Hotel, Cardiff on 22 to 24 February 1991. If you have not sampled the delights of science-fiction conventions before, then this looks as if it will be a frenetic and friendly introduction. Contact Alice Kohler, 75 Hecham Close, Walthamstow, London E17 5QT.

Mexicon this year is at Harrogate. Its organizers are at the moment deciding which two of the three dramatic presentations they have been offered will appear in this year's programme: *Hail Erris* by Ken Campbell, John Dowie's one-man show *Philip K. Dick* or a bizarre and nightmarish cabaret of "speculative erotica," written and performed by a new theatre company.

One which may surprise you.

For example, it features the talents of yours truly, Colin Greenland, M. John Harrison, Geoff Ryman and Dave McKean.

For example, its ultimate aim is to perform not just at conventions, but at arts venues all over the country.

No, it is not a publicity gimmick.

It does not exist merely to sell this or that book. (Nor, contrary to the impression sometimes given by our marketing departments, do we.)

It exists because, philosophical differences apart, we accept that theatre is the best creative chance we've got to forge a new and lively relationship with our audience. If we don't form that relationship, we're afraid that commercial and cultural pressures will turn us all into hush-puppy wearing drunkards (naming no names, there are too many sf writers like that around already). We believe that theatre is a natural part of our repertoire – and that through it we can at last offer to our audience a chance to participate in our work. (Simon Ings)

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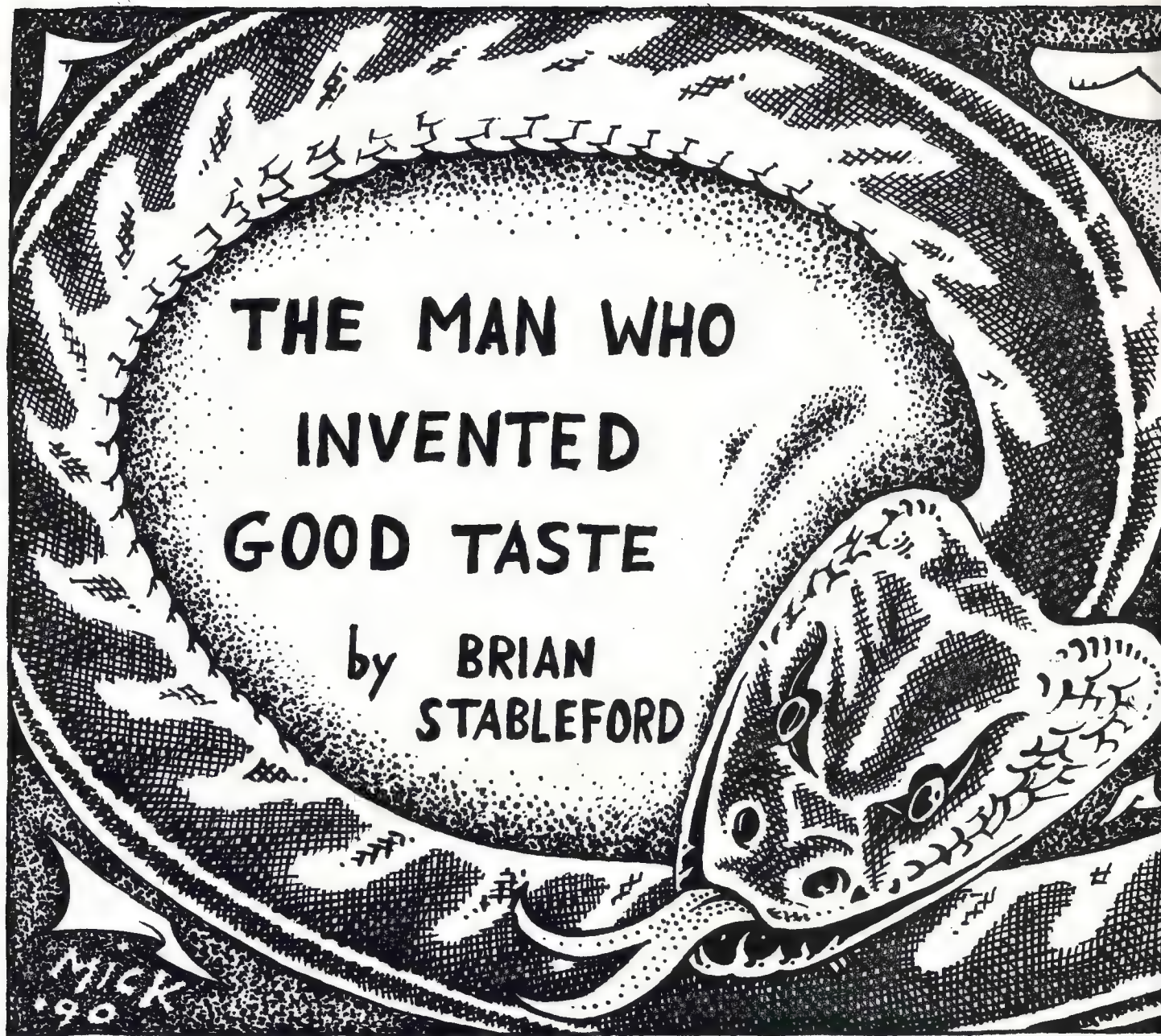
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**S**o you're another one who wants to know everything there is to know about Jon Roriston? Hell, the guy's only been dead a week and already there are three biographies in the works. Well, why not? I'd write one myself if I weren't such a confirmed sprinter in the word-spinning business. You have to hype while the product's hot – nobody understands that better than I do, I can assure you.

How do I get paid – by the word or by the minute? Only kidding – the standard fee will be just fine.

Sure, I know the rules. No hearsay, no speculation – just the straight I-said-he-said stuff. I have done this before, you know. I bet this is your first quickietext, right? You really want to write the Great American Vidnovel, but in the meantime you have to find a way to pay the rent? I thought so. Well, a guy like you should have no trouble at all figuring out Jon Roriston. He was a cat of a very similar stripe, if you get my meaning.

So okay, where do I start – our first meeting? Sure, that's fine by me – I admire a man with an orderly mind.

**F**or me, of course, it was just routine. I was an old hand, and I'd been number one product manager at Ecomech for six or seven years. I used to pep talk all the smart kids they headhunted out of the colleges, acquainting them with the facts of life. They were always full of ideas, those kids, but four in every five thought the market was somewhere his granny used to go to buy groceries. Jon Roriston was a long way from being the odd man out in this pattern, if you get my drift. Whenever I saw stars in their eyes I used to feel a pain in my rear, and little Jon had the brightest stars I ever saw.

I took him out to dinner at a real nice place. He was as nervous as hell, and I think his nervousness boosted his hostility right into orbit – I mean, I was as nice as pie, and there was no reason for the kid to get quite as snotty as he did. He was downright impolite.

"The fact is," he said, "I didn't quite envisage when I took this job that I'd be instructed to work in harness with an adman. I'm not at all sure, Mr Farante, that I appreciate your being given a virtual power of veto on my projects."





Naturally, I was all sweet reason in return. I didn't get on my high horse about being called an adman, though I knew he meant to imply that in his estimation I was only one step up from two-bit copywriter. "What have you got against advertising, Dr Roriston?" I said, meekly. "It's an honourable profession."

"It's a profession whose sole purpose is to persuade people that they ought to spend money on things they don't need," he told me. "It deals promiscuously in false promises, cynical glamourization and low-key psychological warfare. I joined this company because I thought I'd be given the freedom to work on projects which will answer people's real needs and I don't see that I need a product manager to keep tabs on what I do."

The way he said "product manager" made it sound like an expression of disgust, like "maggot" or "dogshit." I just smiled.

"I meet a lot of people who talk that kind of utilitarian stuff, Dr Roriston," I said. "Though I must confess that I never yet met one of them who really acted utilitarian. It isn't easy to separate out people's needs

from their desires, son, and the whole of history proves that people are very often willing to sacrifice things which you'd say they really needed in order to get things which they wanted for reasons you might not approve of – things which would enhance their images. Admen didn't invent desire, or vanity, or envy, Dr Roriston – we just recognize their power as motivating forces.

"If we can sell a man a product which will increase his self-esteem, we've sold him something which he desperately wants, whatever the product actually is. When an adman persuades consumers that they'll feel better about themselves by using a particular brand, he's added real value to that brand. People like you think of it as a kind of confidence trick, and maybe it is, but the consumer isn't the dupe of the trick – he's a fully-fledged collaborator, and the adman is providing a real service. If what you call 'glamourization' is cynical, the cynicism is as much the consumer's as the product manager's, because people never have wanted products which only have use-value if they could get products with glamour as well."



He just shook his head, but I'm a patient man as well as a reasonable one. I persevered.

"The hyping of products is important in any line of business," I said to him, "but it's doubly important in ours, because the biotech industry is mostly about drugs and helping people to be healthy – and I'm sure that I don't have to explain to a man with your degrees what the placebo effect is. The better people can be encouraged to feel about our products, Dr Roriston, the better those products work, and the better those products are. That's why you were assigned your very own product manager."

**H**e still didn't agree with me, of course. What smartass can ever bring himself to admit that he's been outsmarted? But he perked up again when I asked him very nicely to explain to me in words that a dumb non-scientist could understand, just what it was that he intended to do to improve the lot of suffering mankind.

"I did my doctorate on the physiology of taste," he told me. "It was part of a project to figure out exactly how, when you get down to the biochemical nitty-gritty, things taste different – and why some things taste better than others."

I told him I was on his wavelength, because admen knew all about matters of taste, but he seemed to think I was trying to be funny. So I asked him what he wanted to do for Ecomech.

"I came to Ecomech," he said, "because it's one of the few big biotech firms that has no significant investment in the new techniques for mass-producing food – tissue-culture meat, cereal manna, that kind of thing. You see, Mr Farante, I think those companies have a big problem with matters of taste."

"They have, and they know it," I agreed. "They have legions of food-scientists working out how to make their stuff taste good. There's a lot of consumer resistance to things like whole-diet flour, because everybody always says that modern food products don't taste as good as the stuff granny used to bake. It's all nostalgic crapola, of course – in tests nine out of ten people really can't tell the difference."

"The problem's not that the taste engineers aren't doing a good job," said Roriston. "The problem is they're looking at it upside-down. We had artificially-produced whole-diet foods long ago, but they looked and tasted like wallpaper paste – so they started adding flavouring. It began with chocolate and strawberry, and expanded as fast as they could come up with more – now, sixty years on, we have literally tens of thousands of organic chemists trying to make various kinds of nutritionally-adequate mush reproduce all the textures and tastes of traditional foods. It's madness!"

"There you go again," I said, "trying to separate out the needs from the desires. People don't just eat food in order to live; they eat it because they *like* eating. It doesn't matter to them that whole-diet manna supplies their nutritional needs exactly; they won't eat the stuff unless they like the taste – and they don't just want one kind of taste, they want *lots*. And why the hell shouldn't they?"

"You don't understand yet what I'm getting at," he said, in a kind of martyred tone. "This is the problem: genetic engineers have succeeded in producing crop-

plants whose storage proteins supply all our nutritional needs, and which are actually much better for us than traditional foods – but people don't like them. In fact, the vast majority of people are still addicted to foods which *aren't* good for them – at least, not in the quantities which their appetites encourage them to consume.

"Now, the food technologists' idea of a solution to this problem is to reproduce in whole-diet food the same range of taste sensations which traditional foods used to offer. But that's really a pretty silly way to approach it. My idea of a solution is to attack the problem from the other end. Instead of trying to fit the food to people's tastes, I want to fit people's tastes to the food. I want to fix people up so that they like whole-diet food, and so that their appetites will encourage them to like it in exactly the right amounts. That way, they'd be guided to good health by their own desires, and they wouldn't have to pay through the nose to have perfectly good food adulterated by hundreds of artificial flavourings which don't fully satisfy them anyway."

"You mean," I said, in a mildly flabbergasted way, "you want to use genetic engineering to shape our desires, instead of pandering to them?"

"That's exactly what I mean," he said.

**W**ell, right away I could see that the kid had something. In his own way, he was a genius. But he was the kind of genius Einstein was – good at figuring out the theory, but not so hot on the profit side. Not that I have anything against Einstein, you understand, but my idea of a genius is the guy who invented the kind of Body Odour which your best friend wouldn't tell you about, and paved the way for the marketing of all those deodorants which people had to buy *just in case*.

I guess it was then that I realized, for the first time, that Jon Roriston's utilitarian objections to the artistry of advertising weren't just youthful idealism talking through his metaphorical ass. This kid was an authentic utilitarian, who reckoned that if our desires laid us open to exploitation by ads, then we should start thinking seriously about re-orchestrating our desires.

You might think that prospect would horrify an old adman like me, but it didn't – in fact, it interested the hell out of me. I had the imagination, you see, to figure out that there might be more possibilities in the kid's idea than the kid had yet seen. That was my job, after all. But first I needed more details about what he planned to do, and what he actually *could* do.

He didn't need much encouragement to tell me more – it was quite some hobby horse he'd taken to riding.

Taste, he explained to me, is a pretty crude sense at the biophysical level – much cruder than hearing or smell, though not quite as crude as pain. We have only four kinds of taste-buds, which record sweet, sour, salty and bitter. In fact, he said, much of what we think of as the taste of food is really its smell.

I naturally raised the objection that if that were true, messing about with the taste buds wouldn't be enough to make people like food that they didn't like before, because it still wouldn't smell right. He said that wasn't the point, because taste is a more powerful factor in determining whether we like our food than



smell is. He explained that he'd become very interested in the way that people could get cravings for certain kind of food, which varied a lot from person to person and from time to time.

Rorison explained to me, with his eyes shining in anticipation, that what he wanted to do was to take control of the biochemistry of cravings, insofar as it was mediated by the taste-buds, in such a way as to make people crave exactly what they needed, nutritionally speaking. If evolution by natural selection was more efficient, he told me, it would already have done that for us, but it was too blunt an instrument, and it was up to us to give it a helping hand.

I pointed out that it was people's cravings that got them into trouble by making them overeat, but he said that was just a fault in the system. He told me that a brief stimulation of the tongue by something sweet initially creates a demand for more, but that there comes a point when satiation is reached. Unfortunately, he said, our appetites have been shaped by natural selection during hundreds of thousands of years when the main problem was getting enough to eat, and there just hadn't been enough selective pressure to secure an efficient OFF switch. Nevertheless, he said, the basic apparatus was in place, and it just needed tuning up.

I was still sceptical. I believed he hadn't thought it through properly. I confided that I had trouble envisaging the entire population of the world queuing up to have their taste-buds retuned so that they would stop liking all the things they liked, and start liking a mere handful of things they hadn't liked before. To most people, I suggested, that would seem like a kind of castration. I didn't think people would go for it.

Then he got down to the real nitty-gritty. He said that he wasn't proposing to rejig the taste-buds people already had. What he was proposing to do was design and market a new kind of taste-bud – a fifth kind, better than all the others.

I couldn't get my head round the idea immediately. I could only think in terms of a new sensation sweeter than sweet or saltier than salt – but that wasn't what he was getting at. He wanted to create a new kind of taste, which wouldn't be like the other four at all. It would, he said, be a *pleasant* taste which would stimulate the pleasure areas of the hind-brain in much the same way as the sweet taste-buds did, but it would do that job so much more efficiently that it would make all other pleasant taste sensations irrelevant. In addition, the new buds would be essentially moderate, switching off their craving when the host body had had its ration.

I was beginning to see the product potential in more detail by then, but I had one more worry. How exactly, I asked him, was he going to make this new kind of taste-bud respond to whole-diet foods? Even before he gave me the answer, though, I knew what the answer *had* to be – not speaking scientifically, you understand, but as an adman.

"It shouldn't be too difficult," he said. "What I want to do is to tie this new sensation very specifically to a particular organic compound that's not found anywhere in nature. That would become the one and only flavouring for whole-diet foods. It would make people crave the foods, and nothing but the foods, and it





would make people crave exactly the right amount of the foods, so that they wouldn't be tempted to overeat. And because the reward-factor of my artificial taste-bud would be far greater than the reward-factors associated with the natural kinds of bud, my craving would eventually overwhelm and drive out all the others. It's so neat it's brilliant, don't you think?"

"Dr Roriston," I said, with utter sincerity "it's the most brilliant thing I ever heard. If you can do this, you're really going to change the world."

"That's what I figure," he said, as proud as only a pompous smartass can be. "I'm going to be the man who gave good health to all mankind."

"That too, kid," I said, with one hell of a smile on my face. "That too."

Once the kid got to work it didn't take him long to stop resenting me. After all, I cleared his project and put top priority on all his requests for apparatus and testing-programmes. I didn't interfere in the lab. Not that he ever got to like me, you understand, but he did start calling me Eddie, and I started calling him Jon.

For a year or more everything went smoothly. He was a real workaholic and he really went after his target-dates. Half way through year two, though, I began to pick up bad vibes. Gossip said that he'd had some sensational results in his trials, and the test-subjects I talked to said that the new taste-sensation he'd incorporated into his engineered buds was pure magic. But his reports didn't reflect that – they even tended to the negative. I figured he was maybe playing the part of perfectionist just a little too hard, so I went to see him.

"Look son," I said, as kindly as anyone could. "I don't want to rush you, but the safety boys have given your new organics an absolute okay, and your guinea pigs are on cloud nine. Isn't it about time we began to think of launch dates?"

"There's one more problem I have to crack, Eddie," he said. "Just one – then we can go."

"What problem?" I asked.

"It's the buds. We can't customize their tissue-type if we want to sell this stuff to everybody and his cousin, and we can't use drugs to prevent rejection. At present, I can easily get the buds to set themselves up on the tongue and the roof of the mouth, and make them function right away, but in a matter of three weeks they're all gone again, killed off by the body's own defences."

For a few moments, I just couldn't believe what he was telling me. Jesus, if only all problems could be like that! But I knew I had to box clever, because I remembered only too well how easily he could get on his high horse. So I didn't give him a lecture on why the miracle of built-in obsolescence is God's greatest gift to the manufacturer. He didn't care about petty details like repeat sales, and I knew that I had to play to his wacky ideals if I wanted to keep him sweet. So I took a different tack.

"I see what you mean, Jon," I said. "It's a tough one. But it's not insuperable, and I don't think we should let it inhibit our going for an initial batch of patents right now. It wouldn't be right to deprive the world of what you've already got just because it isn't yet perfect. I believe in your project, son, but I have

responsibilities to the guys upstairs, and they get worried when they don't see a bit of action from programmes this far down the line.

"Look at it this way. If we put out what we have now, it'll be that much easier to put the improved version on the market when you've cracked the problem. On top of that, I reckon people will be a lot keener to try it out if they know they'll be back to square one in three weeks. No matter how familiar bio-industrial augments become, there's still resistance to them. You and I are sophisticated guys, but most of the people you want to help are still living in the twentieth century, you know."

It was the last argument that swung it, I think. He was converted, and we put in for the patents and clearances the next day. The product was on the market within nine months.

I'm proud of that first campaign – the one which ran all the HAVE YOU GOT GOOD TASTE? ads. The slogan was a natural, of course – handed to us on a plate – but it was still a five-star punch line, and I think we used it very cleverly. We made twenty-five million in six weeks during the initial craze-phase, even though we were working on a razor-thin profit margin. Everyone was over the moon, from the boardroom suits and the major shareholders right down to the office cleaners.

Everyone, that is, except Jon Roriston.

This time I didn't have to go see him to find out what his problem was. He was knocking on my door the moment he cottoned on to what was going down.

"Jesus, Eddie," he said, "I just saw the half-yearly report which Sales puts out."

"Sensational bottom lines, aren't they?" I said – though I knew that wasn't what he meant.

"It's not the figures for total sales I'm talking about," he said, in a waspish kind of way. "It's the breakdown which shows what sort of volumes each of the flavoured products has done. Do you realize that manna accounts for less than five per cent of our output? More than eighty per cent of our sales are accounted for by candy bars and chewing gum. Chewing gum, for Christ's sake! I didn't even know we were going to make chewing gum until I saw the 3-V ads – and even then it didn't really click. But as soon as I saw the sales figures I looked at the ad budgets – and I found out that you're spending ten or twelve times as much advertising Good Taste gum and candy as you are on manna. What the hell do you think you're playing at, Eddie?"

"Sit down Jon," I said, in my best genius-soothing voice, "and I'll explain. You're a scientist, and I know you'll understand when you have all the facts."

He wasn't convinced, but he sat down, and I began to teach him his A-B-C.

"A corp like Ecomech," I explained, "can't just chuck its products into the marketplace, buy a few ads and hope for the best. We have to plan things very carefully. Geneswitchers aren't the only hotshots we keep around here – we have a legion of top-flight market researchers who have to go out before every product launch to figure out what the public is prepared to buy, and how much they're prepared to pay for it. It isn't an exact science, but it's as exact as we can possibly make it."



"I didn't bother to tell you what the MR boys came back with when they first test-flew Good Taste because I knew you had other things on your mind – your own experiments, your own trials, your own headaches – but their results were very clear, and I knew you'd respect them. You see, they found that the majority of the public isn't quite ready for Good Taste manna. People can see the logic of it, but they don't take quite the same utilitarian view of eating that you do. The great majority were more interested in the possibility of using Good Taste as a fun thing – and that's not so bad, if you think about it carefully. The first automobiles were fun things, and the first microchips were put into electronic games. It's very often the case that the really mould-breaking discoveries have to be marketed first of all in the leisure-and-luxury sector of the market."

He didn't like it. "But you're actively pushing the gum and the candy!" he said. "If you reversed the advertising priorities, sales of the manna would surely go up."

"You're trying to put the cart before the horse, Jon," I told him. "It isn't that more people buy the gum just because we advertise it more heavily; we advertise it more heavily because we know – thanks to the MR report – that more people will try the stuff if we push it in that form. You have to remember that these are early days, and our first task is to get people used to the idea of a new kind of taste, and to persuade them to give it a go. While the buds have to be renewed so often, people can hardly be expected to reconstruct their entire gastronomic philosophy, can they? You have to be prepared to give people time to get used to new ideas. How's the long-life version coming along, by the way?"

"Slowly," he said. He still wasn't happy – in fact, he had an expression like a bloodhound with a hang-over – but he was no fool, and he could see the logic of the case. He stood up to go, but he had an after-thought.

"By the way," he said, "I note that there's also a significant minority market which appears in the sales report as 'sprays' – but I haven't seen any advertising on 3-V for any kind of spray. I'm a bit worried about it – I mean, chewing gum's bad enough, but if we're marketing the stimulator without any carrier whatsoever, there's surely a danger that people might prefer to take it neat. If that happens, our long-term objective of using Good Taste to regulate and rationalize people's eating habits might fall completely flat."

He still had the wrong end of the stick, but I wasn't about to turn it around for him – motivation is so important when a guy's working at the cutting edge. I decided to be a little economical with the truth in order to preserve his illusions as best I could. I told him a little white lie.

"Don't pay any attention to that," I said. "We've been trying out sprays for installing and renewing the buds, just to see how they fly."

"They can't be very efficient!" he said. "The tongue takes up the buds much better from saturated pads. With a spray, you'd only get a tenth of the buds to take, and they'd need renewing in a matter of days rather than weeks."

"It's MR again, son," I told him. "Some people simply prefer using a spray, because they hate sucking a





wet pad for ten minutes. It's all a matter of getting them used to it. But we don't push the sprays on 3-V – we just make them available as a service to those consumers."

He shrugged his shoulders at that, and let the matter rest – for a while.

**D**o you want me to tell you about the personal side of his life, too? Not hearsay, you understand – we did meet in a social setting now and again, in spite of his being such a dyed-in-the-wool backroom boy. You'd rather not? Well, I guess you can get all that straight from the fillies' mouths. That's one good thing about writing about a guy who died so young, I suppose: all the skeletons in his cupboard are still alive and rattling, if you'll forgive the dodgy metaphor. Okay then – business, the whole business and nothing but the business it is.

The first real dispute we had came when I told him he had to introduce some variety into the product.

"I haven't cracked the longevity problem, yet," he complained. "Good Taste Mark Two won't be ready for another two years – and that's the minimum."

"Sorry, son," I said. "The boardroom suits can see the market booming outasightwise, and they want to double up the hype. Good Taste Two has to be along by Christmas or the market will begin to stagnate and competitors will be queuing up to take us on. The new buds don't have to last any longer – less, if you like – but they have to be subtly different. I know you can do it. If there's one kind of artificial taste better than the natural four then logic says that there must be two, or three, and maybe hundreds. It doesn't have to score more pleasure points; it just has to be as good, and different enough so that people can tell."

"But it isn't necessary," he said, with all the whining-power of a tantrum-throwing smartass.

"Can I tell you about something Henry Ford once said?" I asked him politely.

"History is bunk," he came back.

"Not that," I said patiently. "The other one."

"The public can have any colour it wants, as long as it's black," he said, just so I'd know that he was a real all-round genius.

"Exactly," I said. "Great one liner, no? Henry was a utilitarian, just like you. He thought that the most important thing about selling cars to the masses was to keep the price as low as possible, which he did by keeping his production line as simple as he could. One spray job, one colour. Within five years of taking that policy decision Henry Ford had lost forty per cent of his market to the opposition, because General Motors didn't underestimate their customers that way. General Motors knew that their customers wanted choices – choices which they could make on purely aesthetic grounds – and that they were willing to pay for the privilege."

"Jon, you've made the world hungry for new taste sensations, and one just isn't enough. We need a new one this year, and anything up to half a dozen more in the course of the next decade. Nobody else could do it half as well as you, and you have enough pride in your work to make sure that no one else can get into the game with an inferior product. That's what I told the boardroom suits, and I'm relying on you to make my promise good."

Flattery, as the old saying goes, will get you almost anywhere. Once the kid was sold on the idea he went at it like a shark at a sick fish. He had tunnel vision, but while he was in his tunnel he sure was a real sharp operator.

**H**e had to cotton on eventually, of course – even the most unworldly scientist can't stay completely out of touch forever. By the time Good Taste Two was ready he'd finally figured out that the original was being very widely used in ways that the 3-V ads never mentioned. When he saw the first roughs for the ARE YOU THE FLAVOUR OF THE MONTH? campaign he knew what the slogan was supposed to imply, and he really blew his top.

"You conned me, didn't you?" he said when his determination to have a first-class row finally got out of hand. "The first time I asked you about those sprays, you handed me a line. They were being used to carry the stimulator, not the buds – and you lied to me to put me off the track."

"Well," I said, carefully, "we did have a spray-can version of the bud implanter, but it never took off. The sprays that carried the stimulator, on the other hand, went like a rocket once people began to experiment with them. We didn't have to push them on the 3-V, because the boom was led by word-of-mouth advertising. Word-of-mouth is the best kind of advertising there is – it's very effective, and it's free."

"And you knew how people were using the sprays, didn't you?"

I have to confess that I put my diplomatic flair on hold for a minute or two. I mean, the kid had to grow up sometime, didn't he?

"Sure," I said bluntly. "They use it wherever they like to be kissed. Good Taste was the biggest boost to oral sex the world has ever seen. Market Research isn't exactly reliable in areas like that, but rumour has it that Sixty-Nine knocked the missionary position clean off the top of the hit parade within a year of Good Taste going into the market, and if we play our cards right, it'll still be number one in ten years time – maybe forever. You told me your product was going to change the world, Dr Roriston and I agreed with you, because we were both right."

It was the first time I ever saw the smartass flabbergasted.

"You knew this would happen," he said, again – had a bee in his bonnet, I guess. "The first time I told you my idea, you already intended to market it like this. You never had any intention of using it the way I wanted it to be used."

"I'm a product manager," I reminded him. "It's my job to know, right from the moment someone tells me his idea, exactly what can be done with it."

"Eddie," he said, "you're a real bastard. You may be a clever bastard, but you're still a bastard. You strung me along, just to make sure that Ecomech would get the patents. You let me think that you'd play it my way, because you knew that I'd take the idea elsewhere if you didn't."

"Look, son," I said to him, not quite as kindly as I might have. "You have to face up to the reality of a situation. I always knew that it would be a bad mistake to use Good Taste purely and simply as a way of controlling people's diets – not because it wouldn't work,



but because there was too much competition on the technical horizon. For the time being, the product is doing okay even in that line, but in four or five years' time everyone will be getting slim using metabolic retuning and somatic sculpture, and eating what the hell they like.

"Sure, there are lots of people in the world who like to use *Good Taste* as a slimming aid – and some of them may stick with it – but I always knew, and MR backed me up, that if we played it that way we'd only be riding a fad.

"Make no mistake, son – there are already millions of people in the world who *don't* want to eat manna, no matter how good you can make it taste, because they think that like everything else that's good for people, a healthy diet is mind-numbingly boring. And if those people don't want to use the product in that particular way, they won't. We can't make them, because they're free individuals, making their own choices. However persuasive ads are, they can't tell people to do what they don't want to do. Our job is to find out what people *do* want, and then to tell them that we have it.

"We have to reach *all* the people, Jon – not just the people who want to use *Good Taste* the way you think it ought to be used. At the end of the day, you can only make a profit by letting the people choose.

"*Good Taste* is a sensational product. Everybody wants it, everybody likes it – but most of those people are prepared to like it *because it's fun*. Maybe you think people *don't* need fun – or that if they do, they shouldn't – but that's beside the point. The public can have any colour it damn well wants to, whatever you may think about the humble virtues of black – and the same goes for flavours. It's my job to figure out all the colours, including the ones the inventors can't see. There's more than one kind of genius in the world, kid."

"And I suppose," he said, "you're the other kind?"

"That's right," I told him. "Absolutely double-damned right."

I honestly thought he'd take it like a man, once the initial bitterness wore off. I'd given it to him straight, and I thought he'd appreciate it. In a way, I was right – he didn't throw any more tantrums; he just got down to work again, and *Good Taste* continued on the up and up. But he carried a grudge. From that moment on he was determined to get me out of his hair and out of Ecomech. It was okay, because it was time for me to make my next career move anyhow, but I was a little hurt, after all I'd done for him.

He never lost his temper with me again, you know – it was all "yes Eddie, certainly Eddie" on the surface, even while he was working out ways to loosen my position. Underneath, though, there was a real vindictive streak. That's life, I guess. You do your best for people, but you don't have any right to expect that they'll thank you for it. Three months later I moved on, and handed on the *Good Taste* cornucopia to Lady Bountiful from Baltimore – who, in my opinion, wouldn't know a gut-grabbing ad from a hole in the wall.

I liked Jon Roriston, and I mean that honestly. I'm glad I worked with him. More than that – I'm proud

that I was able to work with him. After all, he put me on top of some really great campaigns, and made me a present of some great opportunities to exercise my imagination and my artistry.

I was really glad that he was doing so well – getting the Nobel Prize and all – and I was as sick as a pig when he got himself gunned down by some psycho taking a short cut to the history books. But in my heart of hearts – and I'm being as honest now as I know how to be – I can't help feeling that all this grief over the assassination has led to his being a trifle overrated. I mean, he may have been the guy who did the messy business with the test-tubes, but if you want to know the name of the man who really made *Good Taste* into what it is today, it's yours very truly, Eddie Farante.

After all, who else but an adman could *really* have invented *Good Taste*?

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**Brian Stableford** is currently working on *The Angel of Pain* and *The Carnival of Destruction*, the concluding parts in his trilogy of novels which began with *The Werewolves of London* (Simon & Schuster, 1990; see John Clute's rave review in IZ 43). Also due for publication imminently are two more novels under his "Brian Craig" pseudonym, *Storm Warriors* and *Ghost Dancers* (GW Books). His criticism, including the "Yesterday's Bestsellers" series of essays, appears regularly in *MILLION: The Magazine of Popular Fiction* as well as in *Foundation* and elsewhere.

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# Doing Two Things in Opposite Directions

Ursula Le Guin talks to Colin Greenland

In conversation with Lisa Tuttle, onstage at London's Institute of Contemporary Art, Ursula Le Guin has just affirmed: "I'm a genre writer, through and through. One of the genres is mainstream realism." Sometimes she writes about other worlds. Sometimes she writes about peaceful, sylvan Oregon, where she has lived most of her life. "I write all the wrong things: sf, fantasy, kiddylit, regional. How wrong can you be?"

Le Guin is very aware that there is an official culture, and that it disapproves of genre fiction. Many of her early talks and essays collected in *The Language of the Night* deplore the fact, and call for the walls between genre and canonical literature to be cast down, along with all the other barriers and hierarchies that were scheduled for destruction in the 1960s and 70s. Speaking in 1990 she regrets that this particular demolition has been so postponed; and still hopes for it. When I ask her afterwards, in an office at her London publisher's, why it is that she is a genre writer, she answers at once as if there is an attack to be repelled.

"Unfortunately, there is a kernel of genuine difference. I know perfectly well that writing science fiction is a different enterprise from writing realistic fiction. Writing a young children's book is a totally different matter from writing an adults' book. It's much more like writing poetry, for instance. I have problems with the difference between prose and poetry which has been made absolute in this century, and which I don't think is anywhere near that absolute. I defy anyone to tell me the difference in absolute terms.

"But anyway," she says, "all that aside, what has happened to the genres is that they've been used politically, they've been used moralistically, they've been used as a hierarchy. And that's what I'm fighting. That there is one top genre, that is the novel as we know it; and to name everything else a genre is to prejudge it. This prejudice has to be dismantled, and scoffed at. So that maybe we can finally get back to the truth, which is that there are different, what – perceptions? modes? skills? talents, of authors? Some people couldn't write a fantasy if their life depended on it. Some people couldn't write realism."

Somehow the fact escapes discussion that Le Guin, even-handed in all things, excels at both. Her modesty is disarming, and infectious. It is easy to forget that this respectful, merry, ironical person is a power in the world whose influence has been enormous, and continues, quiet and steady. I begin to understand her fondness for images of the beggar princess – Tenar in homespun, Shevek with his empty hands, Odo sitting on a dirty doorstep in a slum – power invisible, overlooked.

After setting new standards for science fiction with *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969, and reaffirming them five years later in *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin says she has had difficulty getting back into the mode. At the ICA, Lisa Tuttle defended her astutely, indicating the various male sf writers who have spoken up to exclude the new areas opened by feminists in the 1970s, men who have claimed to redefine what sf is. Le Guin let them go with a knowing smile, noting only "that telltale use of the word 'hard'." I wonder whether her problem might be something else: the pressures of fame.

Le Guin says not. "I have managed, partly by where I live, and my lifestyle, to evade them. I'm not that famous. I've got a comfortable reputation which helps in selling books and stories – but it doesn't always." Her audience at the ICA was sparse, and her presence in London has not exactly galvanized the British media. This is the way she prefers it. "If Gollancz ask me to come to England, I can say yes or no. I don't feel trapped. The main effect of my reputation on my life is that I have too many letters to answer. I have a conscience about them, I answer them, and sometimes it practically ruins my writing."

Is that not one of the pressures I was asking about? Still no. "People who write me aren't pressuring, they're appreciative letters, they're intelligent letters – I have to answer them! Agh! I've got lovely readers, I really do. That's the upside of fame or reputation. My books are never bestsellers, never anything near it. They just stay in print, thank God. So I have this long, faithful readership, people who've

been reading me for thirty years, as it were. That's lovely. You can't knock that. I'm pretty firm about saying no, most of the time – I don't go and do PR things, I don't ever go on television if I can help it – and I live in a small western city where a low profile is built-in. Our neighbours think we're kind of funny – 'Oh, he's a professor, she's some kind of writer. But they have a nice cat...'

"What I get from readers' letters is validation. You do get people, usually young people, telling you you've changed their life. That can be quite frightening. Oh God, I don't want to change anyone's life, I just want to write stories. Artists need praise. It's bread, butter, tea, wine – you've got to have some praise." She conjures up the voice of an airhead. "What was his name that you wrote, I liked that." She blesses the airhead. She blesses them all.

In general, though, she has to admit, "The problem of fame and publicity is a real one. Someone like, I should think, Doris Lessing, must have to be extremely strong and extremely agile to avoid having her life just controlled. Or Margaret Atwood, whom I think it may have damaged in some ways. Because Atwood both courts it and flees from it."

Tangential, most often, to the rest of sf and fantasy, Ursula Le Guin's recent work has become varied beyond classifiability. *Buffalo Gals* (1989) was a book of stories and poems about animals. Its predecessor, *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1988), was a collection of essays, lectures, reviews and poetry. Her last novel, *Always Coming Home* (1986), was not a novel at all, but a compendious sheaf of documents from a posthistoric utopia. Now she is in Britain for the publication of *Tehanu*, an unexpected return after seventeen years to her *Earthsea* fantasy series.

"I wander around," she says, "amongst the genres, and therefore I am particularly aware of and indignant about the artificial barriers. But I'm also aware of the real differences, and I appreciate them. That's what I'd like to see, appreciation rather than contempt."

The daughter of an author and an



anthropologist, Le Guin has an appreciation for tales, their forms and uses, that goes deeper and further than literary criticism, than literature itself. "If you look back far enough," she says, "isn't it realism that's the peculiar one? Most literature has been either mythical or fantastic. The realistic novel is the odd phenomenon, and very localized."

"It's the literature of a class rising to prosperity," I propose, "and saying, Let's write about ourselves." Le Guin concurs; but where I'm thinking of Defoe and Smollett and Richardson, she's somewhere else entirely.

"That's what it was in Japan when it occurred. In 11th, 12th century Japan they had novels: non-fantastic, realistic novels about court life. It was a wealthy, secure society — the equivalent of a bourgeoisie, I suppose." She's thinking hard, as if mine were a new proposition and she had to search her memory for evidence. "Right, yes, then it begins coming up in late 17th century France, you get the first real European novels. I'm not putting it down, I love novels. Above any form of literature, I love novels best. But to feel that they are prose fiction, and everything else is somehow derivative or less, is just silly. It's wrong-headed."

"Another odd phenomenon," Le Guin goes on at once, "is the co-optation of the novel by men. This is so perverse, it's bewildering that the critical canon is so male. Always, right from the start, as many women as men have written novels. If any human endeavour has been non-gendered, it's the novel."

She offers examples. "By the time of the Brontës, it was becoming thinkable for women to write fiction. Mary Evans really only changed her name to George Eliot because of her life. By that time it was becoming a genuine profession, and open. Mrs Oliphant did earn her living by writing. She didn't earn the living she should have done. She said her best-paid novel didn't earn what Anthony Trollope's worst-paid novel did. And I think she's probably better than Trollope."

"Anyway," Le Guin concludes, skipping a century or so, "when I came along, writing novels wasn't something where you had to think: should I change my name? Even in science fiction."

I recall her introducing her story "Nine Lives" in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (1975), by saying that when it originally appeared, in *Playboy* in 1969, the editors abbreviated her name to disguise her sex. "What I forgot," she says now, "when I told that story was that my agent had submitted the piece as by U.K. Le Guin. When *Playboy* accepted it, she said, 'You know, I should tell you — They were very gentlemanly about it! Poor things.'"

Le Guin is highly amused by the

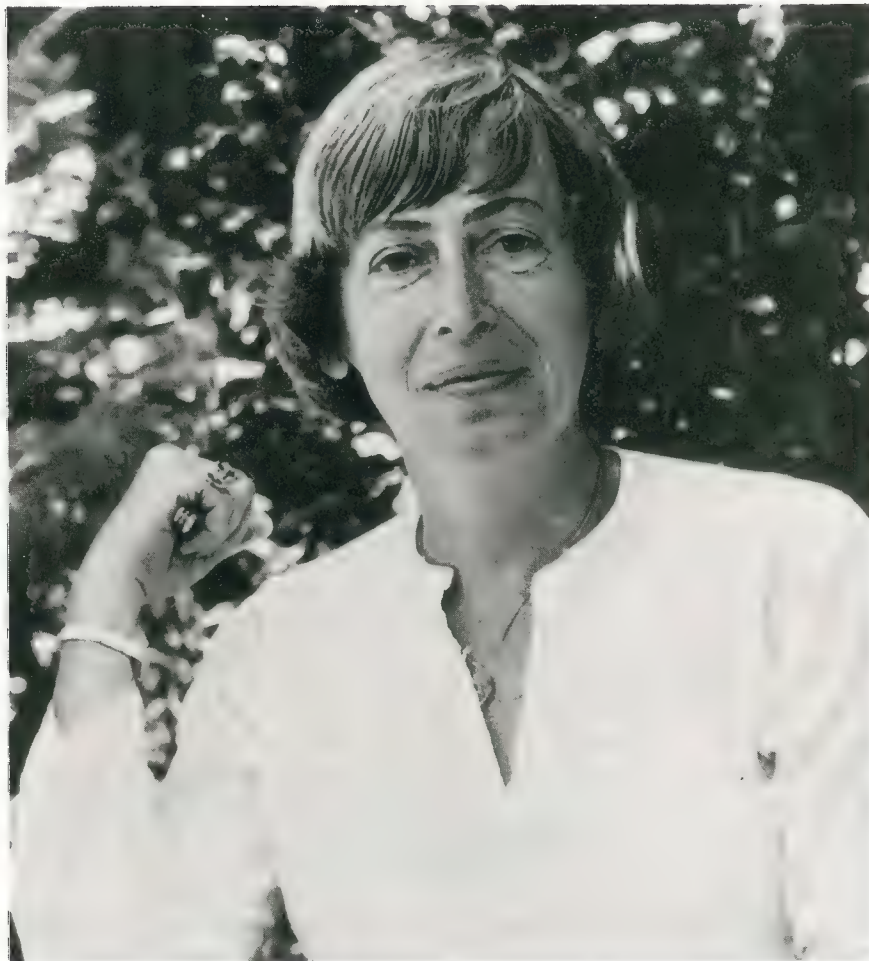


Photo of Ursula Le Guin by Lisa Kroeber

anecdote, all these years later. Le Guin is easily amused, by everything.

Trying to think of an adjective to describe her, I keep coming back to "bright." It sounds a patronizing, schoolmasterish thing to say; but I mean it literally. When she enters the room, a light goes on. Her conversation is illuminating; her manner animated, passionate, mischievous. Her head is silver and sleek and slightly elfin. She ducks it, and looks up at you, smiling. She's pleased with the shabby, nicotine-rich office where Gollancz have set us because it's up only one flight of stairs ("usually we have to go way up in the attic somewhere"); she happily perches on a typist's chair, rather than sinking into a more comfortable executive model, just so I needn't move my tape recorder. It's not simply motherly self-effacement, though there's a trace of that. Rather, it's a secure sense that the considerations of eminence are simply not important. What's important is literature; and today, that means fantasy.

So, why fantasy? What is fantasy for?

"What does it do that other forms don't," she says, rephrasing the question, pondering again. "Well, obviously you have to bring the word 'imagination' in here. It exercises the imagination in a way that nothing else does. In a fantasy you make the imagination do a leap of some kind, to start

with." She mimes a little hop on her chair. "You sort of posit this leap. Then you go on, I think, if you're any good at it, in this prosy tone as if it was all taken for granted and everybody had known about it since they were born. But there is this initial leap, which some people resist, and genuinely, honestly, don't like. And that's fair enough. But other people adore it."

Preference, it seems, is all-important, for readers and writers alike. "It's like whether you want to ride," she says, matter-of-fact, "a horse that runs, or a horse that jumps. There's plenty of room for both. Just so long as nobody gets virtuous about their preference, and says it's because of moral reasons. Or says you can't write both, or read both. Or says that one of them is very bad for children." She laughs, having seen that weathercock spin every way round.

The leap of fantasy. With one bound, she was free. At the ICA, Le Guin reminded her audience of something J.R.R. Tolkien said: that for a captured soldier, escape is a duty. But are we captives? If not, why do we want to keep slipping outside?

"You may get a perspective on things, as it were. Darko Suvin said something about using science fiction to see the back of your head. A nice Central European image. And with fantasy too, you may see the back of your



head, or the soles of your feet, or something really very odd. The inside of your neck or something. There is this distancing mirror, which is placed somewhere else. Or it may just be a change of viewpoint. I don't think fantasy always uses that capacity, or option, whatever you call it."

Though she says she feels partly responsible for it, Le Guin is bracingly dismissive of the explosion of commercial fantasy fiction, the production of huge novels, trilogies, interminable series whose authors seem to be intent on cultivating Tolkien to extinction. "Fantasy can do better than it has been doing," she says. "A lot better. Nowadays it seems to be ground out like baloney. You can't tell 'em apart."

Things were entirely different when she began writing fantasy, in the early 1960s. "The flood of unicorns and all that was yet to come. The prime age to be hooked by fantasy and science fiction is what, between ten and sixteen? Now people go on because there is an increasing body of literature to read, that has accumulated over the decades. There didn't use to be that. When I was sixteen, there were only eight or ten fantasies to read. If you could find them."

Le Guin was sixteen in 1945. But even in the 1960s, and even in Portland, Oregon, which she calls "an incredibly good book town," unicorns were rare. "I remember vividly," she says, "when I would get loose from the kids and have an afternoon downtown. I would methodically work the second-hand bookstores, just looking on the odd shelves to find if there were any fantasies I didn't know about. I came upon *The Book of the Three Dragons* by Kenneth Morris, and E.R. Eddison's *The Worm Ourobours*. But that was like once a year. And then of course there was Tolkien, who was being published while I was in college, but I didn't read him then."

The first signs of what was to become *Earthsea* were two stories published in *Fantastic* in 1964, "The Word of Unbinding" and "The Rule of Names." Then Le Guin was approached by an editor from Parnassus, a small Californian publisher of picture books for very young children, who were planning to expand up the age-range. "He said, 'Would you write us a fantasy novel for young adults?' I said, 'I don't know how to write for young adults.' But I went away and thought about it, and I got the idea. It was one of those things where an editor asks you at the right moment, and just gives you the book."

"I knew it was going to take place in this archipelago. Apparently these islands had been rising out of my subconscious — very Jungian image, by the way: Jung talks about islands of consciousness rising out of the sea of the

unconscious. That's perfect. That's exactly what it felt like. Then..." She gestures. "Draw the map and go."

The drawing of secret maps is "a sub-vice," Le Guin explained at the ICA. She gets sent a lot of maps. *Earthsea* was mapped in "the most feckless and irresponsible way." On the island of Gont there lived a boy by the name of Ged, known as Sparrowhawk. On the island of Roke was a school for wizards. The tale of how the one came to the other was begun in 1967, and published the following year, as *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

Next she wrote a sequel, *The Tombs of Atuan*. "About four months after the end of the first one, I realized there was another book. So I looked back and realized I'd left myself all these nice little openings. That was just to keep the book from closing too tight, to hint that life goes on — but what I'd done was to signal to myself: there's more to follow."

Though *The Tombs of Atuan* is the second volume in the story of Ged, he doesn't appear until halfway through. The novel takes the viewpoint of a whole new character: Tenar, hereditary priestess of the Nameless Ones and guardian of their subterranean labyrinth. "Don't ask me why," says her author, "it just came that way. There was this girl underground."

"What gave me the book was my first trip to the Oregon desert. The western two-fifths of Oregon is very green, very like south England; then you cross a large range of mountains and you're in a high desert, with sagebrush, and a steer every five miles. Very lonesome country. Real beautiful. I visited that for the first time, an overnight trip, a typical tourist trip, and I came back with the book. Every now and then a landscape will do that to you. There's this thing: I've been waiting to come here. This all sounds very mystical, but you know what I mean. Some resonance gets going, which is genuine and becomes permanent."

The origins of volume three, *The Farthest Shore*, are no longer so distinct. "By the time I'd finished the second one," Le Guin thinks, "I probably had a notion that I wanted to come back to Ged, to his point of view." *The Farthest Shore* tells the story of Ged's journey into the realm of death, and his return, leaning on Arren, heir to the throne of *Earthsea*. With this book Le Guin had made what she calls, in one of her characteristic homely analogies, "a three-legged chair. You know: young man, young woman, old man —?"

It's impossible to resist the logic, though I can't say I ever noticed it before. Apparently Le Guin has been working on *Tehanu* for some fifteen years, on and off, and mostly off, as usual without anyone knowing about

it. "When I finished the third one, it was quite clear in my mind that I wanted to come back round to Tenar. But I couldn't do it. I didn't talk about it because I couldn't do it. I never talk about unwritten work. Ever. It's just self-preservation. And I can't talk about work in progress."

So I don't ask.

In the interim she says she has been "training myself, not in wizardry but in feminism." This last chapter of the story of Ged is told from the viewpoint of a farmer's widow, and it all takes place on one island, Ged's birthplace, Gont. It's domestic, yet epochal: powerful magics are abroad. It's also very moving, and sly, and funny. The masculine heritage of the fantasy genre is shrewdly and heftily outfaced. This conflict, this match, is something that Le Guin has thought long and hard about; but only since finishing the first three books.

"Setting out to write fantasy in 1967 felt perfectly natural, and I didn't think a thing about it, because I had grown up with Kipling, and some Macdonald, and all the epics and fairytales. My parents were both interested in world literature, most of which is mythic, fantastic, epic."

*A Wizard of Earthsea*, I notice, is, of the four, the one that's most elevated, most collected, most folkloric in feel. Le Guin agrees.

"Even the language, which is quite formal and stately. It's literary — straight out of that tradition, that I read as a kid. And comfortably out of that tradition." Asking, as a lot of people did in the 1970s, "Why isn't there any sex in fantasy? Is it really all sublimated?"; and recognizing what some readers saw, that *A Wizard of Earthsea* was a classic boys' school story, Le Guin realized: "I'd bought into the tradition. As an unselfconscious woman writing, I dropped into the tradition without any feeling of being foreign to it. I still have no feeling of being foreign to it. Now I see certain anomalies and paradoxes, that this was an intensely male and sometimes very macho tradition, yet I could so easily just assume it was mine, when in a sense it wasn't mine at all. There are all these forces that could keep me out, but I didn't pay any attention to them!"

"The question for a woman writer now is quite different, after twenty years of feminism. Women writers cannot begin unselfconsciously now, any more than men can. We've made it a lot harder for everybody," she says, cheerfully.

Raising the consciousness of the genre has meant having to refuse to take things for granted. Fantasy fiction is always about power, "but in fantasy questions about power are skimmed over in favour of the story,



instead of being dug up and investigated." In *Tehanu* Le Guin found herself homing in on what she calls the "nineteenth-century misogyny" in fantasy, in Macdonald, and Eddison, and Tolkien, and "breaking that down, to make it stronger." She decided to start this particular volume of fantasy about power in powerlessness – the powerlessness of an old woman and a mutilated child. Tenar's adopted daughter Therru is incurable, Le Guin insists, even in *Earthsea*. Magic won't do it. Magic, in any case, seems to be running dry. *Tehanu* is a book about the lurch, the sigh, between the waning of one system and (because it's Le Guin) the waxing of another.

In the old days, she says, "my heroes always used to take over – all those lectures Ged gives us! When in doubt," she advises, in passing, "blame your characters."

"But in *Tehanu* the men are troubled and confused. Obviously they're going to go on. Arren is going to be a good king. A first-rate king, I'd say, from all the evidence. He's obviously got a gift for administration."

But there is another power coming up, or back. "The dragons," Le Guin says, "are or represent a different kind of power from the powers in *Earthsea* – marginalized, unused, something to do with women..."

She's audibly floundering. "The dragons are where I become quite inarticulate. Here's where I get mystical. The mystification is thorough. It's definitely there. This is one of those things where you leap into the void. You're not just riding a horse that takes a jump, but one that takes off. And you don't know where you're flying to. I left the book open at the end, to let it fly; although grounding it in Tenar's question: 'Where can I live?' At the end of the book she says, 'I think I can live there. I think we can live there.' That question is answered, but that turns out not to be the final question at all. The question is where can Therru live? And that question I can't answer. Nobody can answer."

*Tehanu* is "an attempt to open a door that has been shut. I can't go very far through that. I don't know who can."

Turning back then, from the abyss, to more mundane questions, let's talk about writing female power. "I don't know how far I got with that," says Le Guin, underestimating herself again, still haunted by the abyss. "Heroism is redefined as an ordinary, everyday thing, accessible to men, women, children."

A *Wizard of Earthsea* is addressed, Le Guin estimates at the ICA, to a reader who's "11-up." *Tehanu*, on the other hand, considers virginity, and assault, and rape – more a mother's book than a child's. In contrast to *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the language of

*Tehanu* is not elevated, it's the language of a woman telling her daughter stories in the kitchen.

"It's extremely plain and ordinary," says Le Guin. "No thee's and thou's." But this is not what's on her mind. "I'm still thinking about that question the woman asked in the third row. Will people see this as a deconstruction of *Earthsea*, as an invalidation of the text of the three books? That's obviously a risk, and for some readers it will do that. For me, it revalidates them. I took the risk of unmaking something I'd made, because I wanted to ground *Earthsea* more securely, in a larger perception. The perception is different," she says firmly, "the world is not changed."

I remind Le Guin of the way the woman in the third row phrased her question. She sounded disturbed, even upset. She wanted to know why Le Guin had "shaken the foundations of *Earthsea*."

"I thought I'd got to the foundations,

found what the foundations are. That was my effort. What did she say, she read them at the age of ten? People say that to me. 'I read your books when I was a child.'" She's laughing again. "Well, I wrote them when I was an adult! I suppose people who haven't read *Earthsea* since childhood might resent this one, because it demystifies whatever they've made of it in retrospect."

So I quote something else Le Guin said onstage: "the feminist project is demystification."

"Of certain things that have been mystified, yes. Including genres and genders."

But one of the things fantasy has to do is mystify.

She laughs with pleasure now. "That's exactly the kind of thing I love. Doing two things in opposite directions at the same time. That's what's fun."

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# Heads or Tails

Neil Jones

**T**he old Gan was at his favourite corner table in the travellers' lounge of the Gan starport, taking his ease and sipping a demi-dram of RimFire, when he saw the biped.

It was standing in the entrance, scanning the crowded lounge, presumably looking for a vacant table. It lacked eyestalks, the Gan noted, which necessitated the questing movements of its single head. Otherwise a very practical design, though not much, perhaps, from the aesthetic point of view.

Keeping three eyes fixed on the creature, the Gan used a fourth to consult his well-used copy of the *Guide to Galactic Sentients*. The entry was disappointingly brief, identifying the biped only as a Human, from a recently contacted planet out on the galactic fringe. Nevertheless the Gan was delighted. Since his retirement, observing the aliens in transit through the Gan starport had become his main pastime and an encounter with an entirely new species was something of an event.

And all the tables in the lounge were occupied. Here was a splendid opportunity for closer observation of this intriguing creature. He raised his upper pair of left arms to attract the Human's attention, simultaneously indicating the space at his own table with the lower pair.

After a moment's hesitation, the Human moved across the lounge towards him. An admirable sense of balance, the Gan decided, considering that it was using only two limbs.

"Thank you," said the creature in Vocal Galactic.

"Quite all right," rumbled the Gan. "A pleasure, I do assure you."

The table hummed for a second or so, then extruded a suitable seating configuration. The Human descended into it.

"Going far?" asked the Gan companionably.

"Galactic Centre."

"Ah! All the way to the capital. On business?"

"Trade negotiations."

"Indeed. Most interesting."

The table produced a container of steaming dark-brown liquid. The Gan watched in fascination as the Human reached out with one limb, grasped the container with flexible digits, lifted it to the same orifice it had used for speaking, and drank. An unorthodox arrangement to say the least...

**T**he Human studied the starliner timetables on the display panel and the Gan racked all three of his brains for a conversational gambit. Care was needed here, he knew. These aliens often took great offence at the most unexpected things. It was always best to start with some innocuous topic...

"Unless I'm very much mistaken," he began, "you're from Sol 3, are you not? We don't get many of you Humans passing through here. Tell me, how many sexes does your species have?"

The creature's single head came up and both eyes focused on the Gan.

"Not more than three, I'd say," the Gan went on conversationally. "Only a guess, of course."

"Well," the Human said at last, "that's a difficult question. I suppose, theoretically speaking, the correct answer would be two."

"Two," repeated the Gan. "A sensible sort of number, I've always thought. Makes fertilization interesting without being too complicated, eh?" He took a generous sip of his RimFire. "Now we Gan have four, and that can lead to all sorts of inconvenience, I can tell you."

"Really."

"Oh yes," he said, allowing his mind to drift back to his youth for a moment. "I could tell you stories. I'm sure two is a much more economical way of dealing with the reproduction business. Keep it simple, eh? One sex to do the impregnating, and one to be impregnated. By the way, how exactly do you go about it? — fertilization, I mean."

The Human put down its container of liquid. "I'm afraid I wouldn't really know."

"Oh?" The Gan peered more closely at the creature but it was difficult to tell very much about its body with the coverings it was wearing. "Are you perhaps still in the larval stage?"

"It's like this," the Human said presently. "Originally there were two sexes. Now there's only the one."

"Oh dear," said the Gan. "I didn't realize. How unfortunate. A plague of some sort?"

"No. A war."

"A war? You mean — the killing of sentients?"

"Yes."

The Gan was shocked. He took a little RimFire while he pondered this. "I don't know very much about this sort of thing — but isn't it rather unusual



for a –" the Gan hesitated over the word, "a war to wipe out an entire sex? A species, perhaps, but –"

"That's why we called it the Great Sex War."

"I see." The Gan laced several pairs of limbs in contemplation. "And in this – war – one of your sexes totally exterminated the, the –"

"The other one. Yes, that's about it."

"What a terrible tragedy!" said the Gan with feeling.

"Not at all. As a matter of fact, it's simplified things a great deal."

**T**he Gan's three brains debated this for a moment. "Well, there is the matter of reproduction...?"

"We manage well enough. And," the Human added, "if the things they hint at in the history books are true, we're much better off without them."

"But surely," the Gan went on after a moment, "I would have thought that there would still be an in-built need for some kind of –"

Just then the table murmured in Vocal Galactic. "If you'll excuse me," the Human said, rising, "I believe that's my boarding call."

"Why yes. Yes, of course," said the Gan politely, concealing his disappointment. "It's been extremely pleasant talking to you."

As the Human made its bipedal way across the lounge, the Gan reflected that the encounter, brief as it had been, had at least confirmed the popular wisdom of the Galactic community: that the combative

species was – in evolutionary terms – a dead end. In many ways a comforting thought.

He was already phrasing an update to the entry in his *Guide to Galactic Sentients* when a final question occurred to him. "Wait," he called out quickly. "Excuse me."

The Human's head swivelled towards the Gan but the creature maintained its motion towards the departure gate and the waiting starliner beyond.

"There was something I didn't quite catch. Which of the two sexes did you say you were?"

"Well, actually," the Human called back, just before it disappeared through the gate, "I didn't."

---

Neil Jones wrote "Hands" (*Interzone* 43). His other published stories to date are "The Spells Below" and "Ghost Town" which can be found in the anthologies *Red Thirst* and *Route 666* (both GW Books, 1990, £4.99). Born in Yorkshire 42 years ago, and raised in Wales, he used to work as a teacher of English to foreign students in Brighton; but since January 1990 he has been employed as an editor at Games Workshop Books, where his duties include the on-screen editing of the latest GW titles by Jack Yeovil (Kim Newman), Brian Craig (Brian Stableford), Ian Watson and others. Together with his friend and fellow-writer Neil McIntosh, he has also been *Interzone's* regular reviewer of original anthologies over the past couple of years. His reviews of crime fiction appear in *Million: The Magazine of Popular Fiction*.

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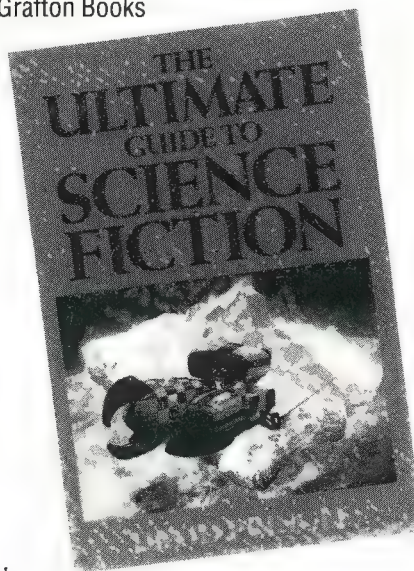
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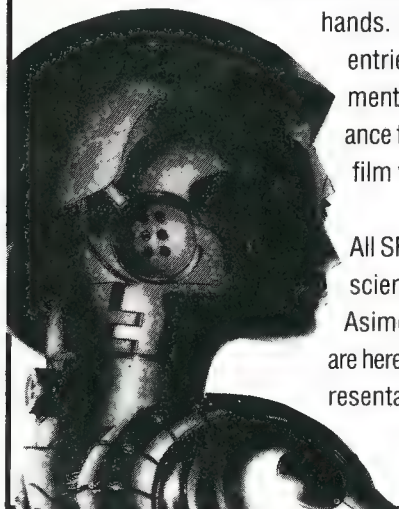
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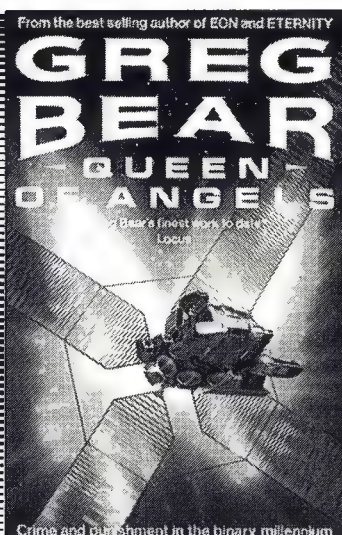
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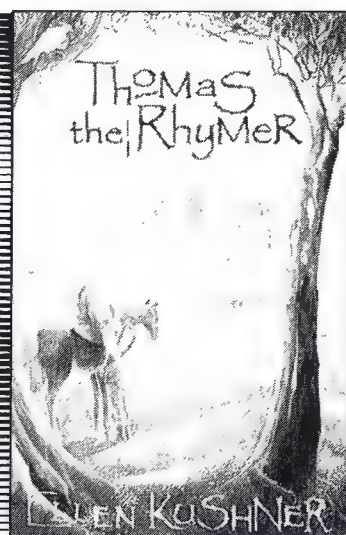




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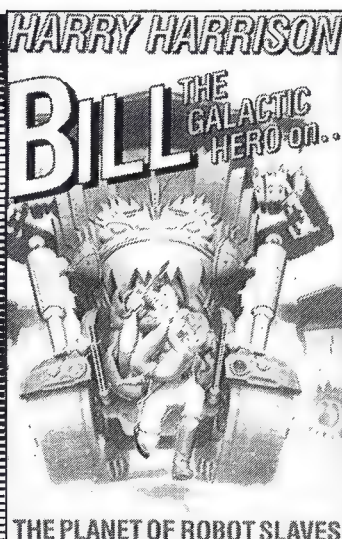
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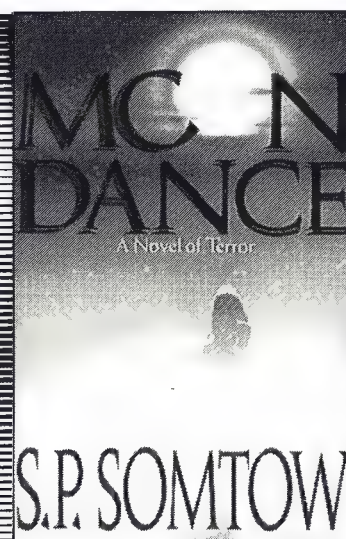


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# Sounding Hollow

## John Clute

They begin together, and step apart in time. **Hemingway's Suitcase** (Simon & Schuster, \$18.95) by MacDonald Harris, and **The Hemingway Hoax** (Hodder & Stoughton, £12.95) by Joe Haldeman, both start with and revolve around the same moment in December 1921. Ernest Hemingway, still new to Europe and throbbing with newness and youth, had gone to Lausanne to cover an international conference for some news agency. Hadley, his wife, had remained in Paris, preparing to join him as arranged for a skiing holiday. As Haldeman says, "This is where it gets odd." Apparently on impulse, as Harris says, "Hadley decided to surprise Hemingway by taking along all of his manuscripts; so he could work on them during the evenings during the ski trip. She packed everything he had written up to that time in a small suitcase. The longhand originals, the typescripts, and the carbon copies of the transcripts." "She packed them in an overnight bag," says Haldeman, demurring slightly. In any case she took the suitcase, or the bag, to the correct train in the Gare de Lyon, where a porter put it in a compartment for her. She then (as Harris says) "got out to talk to some newspapermen she knew on the platform," or (as Haldeman deposes) "left the train to find something to read," and when she returned the bag or the suitcase was "gone" (Haldeman), "gone" (Harris). Gone. Nothing was ever recovered. This is history. Everything Hemingway had written, stories, part of a novel, notes, everything except for a few stray items was gone for ever.

There is no mystery in being robbed, no novelty in suffering a numbing loss, and perhaps no unplumbable human mystery behind Hadley's decision to pack everything, including duplicates, into one fragile container; and Harris spends no time anywhere in *Hemingway's Suitcase* attempting to devise a plot-turn to make sense of the chill of things so indifferently uncovered, the dry-ice suck of the unharmonied world. Things happen. There is no tune. There is no magic reversal in Harris's book for Ernest Hemingway, whose greatness may have been born in December 1921 in the cauterization of loss, or whose surreal and thespian machismo may have only then found a lesion to gorge upon until the final shotgun let the hollow out; who can say? Haldeman, being an sf writer, and tropic for meaning like all born sf writers, cannot, in all honour, in the end, keep himself from returning to the wound of December 1921, and trying to heal it with a generic device or two; but Harris, who is a smooth-tongued old singleton fabulator, an extremely cunning stylist whose *Saturday Evening Post* gloss only serves to slip the knife in deeper, does not. It is hard,

in fact, to think of two books whose incipits are more similar and whose shapes are less.

**H**emingway's *Suitcase* begins with an entire short story told in an extremely tolerable rendering of what the real man's story-telling style might have been in 1921. Harris, taking a very evident delight in doing Hemingway, gives us several such stories, repeating late in the book the final sentences of "The Lady with the Dog," which is the second of these, out of pride perhaps. He is right to do so:

That was a bad time, but after the war I had a lot of good times too. I didn't know what I was thinking this way for, as if my life were over. I was still young and there would be other good things to do. Even when I was old I could live in my memories as they say in books. I could remember that I had talked to Madame Khlestakov in the Luxembourg, that I took her to dinner at Maxim's, and that I didn't have the money to take her to a hotel. That was the only good luck I had with women that summer.

Sometime in the late 1980s, these "Hemingway" stories turn up in the hands of a man named Nils-Frederik, who may or may not have written them himself, who may or may not have the actual Hemingway suitcase stashed away in his Los Angeles home, who denies nothing and affirms nothing to his literary-agent son, but who suggests to him that it might be interesting to publish the stories, which might constitute nothing but a reverie of parodistic re-creation (or not), under the title *Twenty Stories*, edited by Nils-Frederik. There is no claim that they are Hemingway's, no admission that they are not.

The remainder of *Hemingway's Suitcase* is an archly devastating exploration of the existential mirror-game thus set into motion in Los Angeles, a world of costumes, façades, counterfeits and confidences, masks, charades. Whether or not they are fake, it is only the stories that are real. "Fiction is true," says the son. "After it's established it becomes a kind of truth, parallel to but not the same as the real world ... I learned this at Johns Hopkins, in a course I took from Hugh Kenner." The only true moments in all the book are

those vicariously lived – by its characters and by its readers – through reading the fake stories that propel it. Or not fake. It does not much matter. *Hemingway's Suitcase*, mild-mannered and rather gentlemanly in the telling, opens the abyss. It is a very funny book, but one which empties utterly, except for the lies it tells. It is a memento mori, a gloss upon the hollow. All our genres of understanding shrivel in the smile that lingers on the skull.

**A**fter that, for a few pages, it is nice to settle down with Joe Haldeman, who is going to make sense – we're sure of that, he's a genre writer, he's got to – and for a few pages that is what he does. We are in Florida a few years hence, just before the Hemingway centenary, and Professor John Baird, a Hemingway expert with a freak eidetic memory, is tempted by a conman into forging some stories in the style of 1921. This causes some perturbation up the line of the multiverse, because any tampering with the Hemingway nexus may save a whole series of parallel worlds from self-termination in a nuclear war in 2006 and that would undermine thousands or millions of other parallel time-lines; so a non-human time-patrol agent is ordered to stop Baird.

But every time the agent – transformed into Hemingway's image – kills the heavy-drinking, slightly punch-drunk fabulator in one line of the world, Baird awakens with his memories intact in another (Haldeman does not make it clear what happens to the Baird-consciousnesses displaced in this fashion, or maybe he does – this reviewer, for one, has never understood a time-paradox tale), and there is a great deal of extremely worthy sex, and the failure of the world to end in 2006 becomes ever more likely, because – as it turns out – any retroactive softening of the macho Competent-Man image Hemingway promulgated in his fiction will modify the mind-set of a couple of people in power just enough to keep their fingers from pressing a couple of nuclear triggers. Baird, whose memoriousness may explain his self-retention through the worlds, himself now travels himself back to 1921, and the plot becomes



very complicated indeed (it was not understood by this reviewer), surcharged with melancholy and ending in a plethora of Hemingways.

During all this Haldeman, a writer not much noted for linguistic foregrounding, wisely avoids giving us more than a few paragraphs of rather plump Hemingway pastiche, which makes it a bit difficult to assert that *The Hemingway Hoax* knows in its bones what the fuss is all about; but in the closing pages a sense of requiem does, finally, begin remotely to toll in the mind, and the boondoggle of genre fades just sufficiently for one to return to the central loss, briefly. The extremely brief text contains half a dozen stories – half a dozen tropisms of genre – all of which start off like hares and then blink out (I could not even work out absolutely for sure whether or not the world was going to end), and one is tempted to read these little deaths of story as being anything but inadvertent, anything but accidental assonances of Baird's own sharp transitions through the tale. They imitate, in other words, the loss. Baird's deaths are Hemingway's wound. In the end *The Hemingway Hoax* becomes a proper requiem, a eulogy of the little death of 1921 through a series of body-English lesions of its own, a submission of generic thinking to the abyss.

**I**n *Moving Pictures* (Gollancz, £12.95), Terry Pratchett has done two things. He has written the funniest Discworld novel yet, and the most shambolic. The humour of the thing is fresh and inventive and newly minted in tone, the stagecraft of the timing is consummate; but it really is a fine mess of a story. Perhaps Hollywood was Pratchett's magic lozenge, the old Washington-chopping-down-the-cherry-tree glitter in the eye of the *idée-fixé* progenitor. Perhaps *Moving Pictures* was a novel he had to tell. Or maybe he just tripped.

Thirty miles or so from Ankh-Morpork is a sand dune at the edge of the sea guarded by a geezer who performs rites he does not understand in order to keep something at bay. He dies. The something at bay, which finds its focus here at Holy Wood, lies normally on the other side of reality, whose fabric can, however, be weakened. This nullity-with-a-longing now begins to seep inchoately through as a kind of mesmerizing afflatus, and draws a number of Discworld characters into trekking westward to the locus of the world of dreams. Alchemists are inveigled into inventing film stock and cameras (boxes inhabited by irritable demons with fast paint brushes). Young men and women (more of Pratchett's constant supply of adolescents looking for work) show up to become stars.

Movies are made, and through the dream-nullity of film creep even more tendrils of the ravenous un-real from the other side. The Discworld pales (we are to assume, though Pratchett, as usual, dodges the dark seam of the trope he's riding) with haemorrhage. But the young lad and lass manage, in the nick of time, to seal the reality hole shut. The delicate fabric of Discworld reality weaves itself back together.

It is not a hard story to imagine being told, but is one which Pratchett clearly found almost impossible to articulate. The reason, I think, is simple. Much of the best comedy – certainly much of Pratchett's comedy – depends upon a superbly timed presentation of gaps between what is the case and what is understood to be the case. (Pratfalls are a body English of the gap, and so are puns.) The problem with *Moving Pictures* is that the plot only works – the menace only menaces – if it is understood to be the case. The heroes can only rise to the occasion if they know what the occasion is. By making a couple of his characters clearly intelligent – while at the same time making sure that one, the Archchancellor of the Unseen University, is so “comically” obsessed by huntin-and-shootin that he refuses to pay attention, and that the other, young Victor the protagonist, is so constantly flummoxed by puppy love that his head is half-unscrewed – Pratchett both recognizes the fact that his plot needs somebody to understand it, and demonstrates how fundamentally disinclined he is to bite the bullet.

But we will not pother on about the Hollywood Coliseum beneath the sands, incoherently described and altogether woolly as a venue, or about the strange flatness of the climactic scenes (which nobody quite seems to follow), or the final moments of the novel (in which the entire case – this does seem confessional – literally forgets the whole story). What sticks in the memory is the jokes, the wit, the sustained hilarity of great stretches of the book. The two dogs – read *Moving Pictures* for them alone – are immortal. Gaspode is everything I (for one) have loved about dogs, and Laddie is everything else. The trolls, the Hollywood puns – the most elaborately prepared being perhaps the sight of a giant bimbo climbing a tower with the Librarian of the Unseen University in her paw – the avarice routines, and on, and on: There is nothing funnier being written today.

**B**riefly noted: *Kalimantan* (Century, £8.99 hb; £4.99 pb) by Lucius Shepard, set in 1980s Borneo, reads as we are clearly intended to read it – as a scientific romance written by Joseph Conrad (edited by Graham Greene). There is a flashback narrative told by a morally complicit Marlowe figure to

an unnamed interlocutor; there is a geographical trek upriver into epiphany, to the heart of darkness, to the place where universes intersect, where the eye can see the shape of things whole; and there is the overwhelming aura of belatedness so characteristic of the form. As a cognitive tool of the fading imperialisms of the last century, the scientific romance form is precisely designed to reflect backwards upon gnostic epiphanies forever closed to us, and *Kalimantan* is an utterly knowing pastiche of that form, of what one might call the Edwardian Moment. (Even Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* creeps sideways into the act.) The epiphany itself – an alternate Borneo inhabited for aeons by dying aliens – does not, perhaps, serve very well as sounding board for the moral disquisition between burnt-out-case “Marlowe” and quiet-American “Kurtz” that powers the plot, but the final pages of the tale absolve any failures of focus in their ghostly rewriting of the material so far understood, their extreme richness of intonation: *Kalimantan* is a gaze upon the fading of things, an echo chamber of farewells.

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## Love or Money

### Paul J. McAuley

**T**rilogies and sequels aren't only committed in cold blood, purely because of commercial considerations (it's easier to get shelf-space for trilogies; it's easier for publishers to sell an author if her books are closely similar...we're talking product here, we're talking brand recognition, we probably aren't talking literature). No, it only seems that way. Even in sf and fantasy, where genre novels tend to double and redouble like amoebae, clogging the shelves with clone-trilogies and dekalogies in which each volume retreads the themes and actions of the last with ever-diminishing effect.

For not all sf writers write the same book over and over, and not all sequels are doomed to hermetically repeat the mistakes of their predecessors. Sometimes sequels just sort of happen. The book is written, the case is closed, and then an idea arrives by Federal Express from Poughkeepsie which revives the scenario and the characters, which opens the closed book in a brand new light. Coincidence dumps two such examples on my desk, together with the final volume of a thematic trilogy which lays a final palimpsest on its milieu. And I'm as sure as I can be that Ursula Le Guin and Bob Shaw, who have revived series closed out in the



'70s, and Kim Stanley Robinson, who closes out his Orange County trilogy, wrote more for love than money.

Some fifteen years ago, Le Guin's fantasy trilogy set in the magic-governed archipelago of Earthsea attracted charges of anti-feminism because of its male-centred magic (*Weak as woman's magic, wicked as woman's magic* was the saying which notoriously defined the role of Earthsea women) and its male-centred narrative. Now, with *Tehanu* (Gollancz, £9.95), comes a reassessment of the premises of the original trilogy – and while, like the trilogy, this last book of Earthsea is presumed (at least by the publishers) to be a “children's” novel, it is as powerful as any of Le Guin's work.

We remember that at the close of the trilogy, the arch-mage Ged had saved Earthsea by descending into the underworld and closing a gate between the worlds of the living and the dead which had been opened by a black magician, a feat that stripped Ged of his powers. Thereafter, his fate was left ambiguous: either he returned to the island of his birth; or he vanished into the dragon-haunted west, and legend. In *Tehanu* this narrative Heisenbergian uncertainty collapses into the former possibility. Close to death, Ged returns home on the back of a dragon, and is nursed back to health by Tenar, the girl he had rescued from the Tombs of Atuan, now grown into a mature woman, mother and widow. As she has grown, so Ged has diminished. Magic gone, he doubts all, and returns to his boyhood occupation of goatherding, on Tenar's farm under her protection.

For Tenar is the centre of the book, and man's inhumanity to woman, a consequence of unchecked power, is its theme. Tenar has already taken in a gypsy girl abused and horribly burnt, yet who might also have powers beyond even those Ged once possessed. And Tenar has also been summoned to attend the last hours of Ged's mentor, the mage Ogion, and it is she who asserts Ogion's dying wish over the squabbling of two magicians, who each wants to appropriate the honour of burying Ogion on his own territory.

For these two acts, for transgressing the role of women as defined by men in the mundane and magical spheres, Tenar becomes the focus of male enmity, from one of the gypsies, and from one of the magicians, a secret servant of the black magician whom Ged defeated. And after a lifetime of serving men, as priestess and then as wife, Tenar realizes the commonweal of women, and that their magic, their power, is not weak or wicked, but merely different. Thus, in the preceding volumes it was a given that people could not meet the gaze of dragons, here it is asserted that while men

cannot meet that gaze, women can. A semantic quibble perhaps, but semantics is at the heart of this book, in which the power of magic is the power of naming, of finding the right word. That women's magic is weak and wicked is a male assertion against something they can't understand, the community of women from which they are forever excluded.

Unlike its predecessors, *Tehanu* contains no sweeping narrative. Its action is small-scale and local, restricted to one corner of one island of Earthsea's wide archipelago, and interlaced with the domestic tasks, invisibly performed by women, that lubricate civilization. But that does not mean it is less powerful than the preceding volumes. Le Guin's style is deceptively simple, strong because it contains all it needs to contain, no more, no less. Each word does its share of work; each is the right word. Together, they build a fantasy that, with passages of overt, mature sexual feeling, at times seems aimed beyond the young audience. It is one we can all appreciate, and a graceful, thoughtful closure.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge* (Unwin Hyman, £13.95) is the concluding volume in his thematic trilogy about twenty-first century Orange County, home of Disneyland and a large percentage of the United States' military and aeronautical industry. Like the preceding novels, *Pacific Edge* explores the human consequences of history in close-up; and like its predecessors, *Pacific Edge* strongly reflects the times in which it was written. In the first of the trilogy, *The Wild Shore* (1984), history had come to an end for the United States, its technology and role as a world power bombed out of existence by satchel nuclear weapons, and kept in check by satellite-mounted lasers. In the second, *The Gold Coast* (reviewed in *IZ* 32), the Cold War had run out of control of its planners and the values it was supposed to defend, burying America's past under dense conurbations serving Star Wars industries.

*Pacific Edge* is an altogether sunnier novel, as befits the end of the '80s, of Reaganism and Thatcherism, and of the Cold War. The green revolution has triumphed. A campaign by radical lawyers has eliminated multi-national cartels and accumulation of personal wealth through anti-trust laws. High technology has been harnessed to conserve energy and resources, and has turned the world into a global village. Society is run from the bottom up, with local people deciding local issues on town councils.

In short, *Pacific Edge* is an examination of the responsibilities of utopia, and like much of Robinson's work it is also a rite of passage. In this case a

growth to maturity of bio-architect Kevin Claiborne, a child of the earth who at the late age of thirty must come to terms with love, and learn to fight for what he believes is right. His town's mayor is attempting to develop a small hill at the edge of town that is an intensely personal place to him, and Kevin falls into a love affair with the mayor's recently ex-Significant Other of fifteen years' standing. This triangle more or less defines the plot, which at times threatens to verge on soap-opera sentiment – especially when the fight to save the hill galvanizes Kevin's grandfather, a virtual hermit who was once one of the lawyers who changed the world and who in the course of the book rediscovers love and life. But Robinson is a skilful and intelligent writer, and while his characters sometimes verge on caricatures of self-obsessed perpetual American adolescents, *Pacific Edge* is a work of considerable maturity. His celebrations of the bright complex surfaces of the quotidian world, of the joy of winning something from the world by exertion, of human-powered flight, softball and mountain hiking, are wonderfully drawn; his knowledge of ecology and the political tangle of Californian water rights is phenomenal.

Despite a stormy sea voyage, the viewpoint of an outsider wryly commenting on the hedonistic self-righteous Californian body-culture, and extracts from the prison journal of Kevin's grandfather, *Pacific Edge* never quite widens its narrow perspectives: the hill remains a hill and never becomes a symbol of anything grander than one man's life. But of course that is the difficulty of writing about utopias: nothing truly dramatic can happen, for otherwise they would be unmade. It is to Robinson's credit that he populates his utopia with real people, airheads and all, and *Pacific Edge* is both a celebration of what we could achieve, and a thoughtful examination by one of sf's most thoughtful writers of the work we must do to achieve it, and to keep it.

Back in the '70s, as the sf market contracted so the artifacts around which hard sf writers constructed their fictions seemed to get larger and larger, a rule I resist defining. Larry Niven's *Ringworld* is well-known; Greg Bear was laying the groundwork for his fascination with the infinite (and its noisy destruction); Greg Benford was making his first tentative one-to-one mapping of the real Universe. And Bob Shaw created an object bigger than *Ringworld*, yet as immediately apprehensible: the Dyson sphere of *Orbitsville*, an inside-out world englobing its sun with million-fold multiples of the Earth's surface. It seems that two novels were insufficient to scratch the surface of *Orbits-*



ville's mysteries, and now, perhaps in the light of recent cosmological speculations, Shaw has delivered a third and defiantly final volume, *Orbitsville Judgement* (Gollancz, £13.95), to explain the strange ending of *Orbitsville Departure*.

In many ways it is vintage Shaw. Almost all of Earth's population has moved to Orbitsville, most scattered widely in small low-tech communities; by focusing on one such community, Shaw neatly evokes the vastness of Orbitsville and its profound effect on the human psyche through the mundane, the day-to-day problems of living inside a vast sphere. His hero, Jim Nicklin, is a typical Shavian character, a pragmatic loner, an ordinary man yet one marked out by his intelligence and cheerful cynicism. It's unfortunate that he is mostly wasted in a plot that requires him to act either as an idiot or a Machiavelli.

Meanwhile it turns out that Orbitsville is not just any old Dyson sphere. At the beginning of *Orbitsville Judgement*, coterminous with the end of its predecessor, Orbitsville is shifted entire to a new universe. News straggles across vast territories until it reaches the little town where Nicklin lives, coincident with the arrival of a doomsaying preacher who is convinced that Orbitsville is a trap set by its builders, the mysterious Ultans. Idiot-like, Nicklin is seduced by one of the preacher's acolytes and parts with all his worldly wealth; armed with Machiavellian cunning, Nicklin joins up with the preacher's band and leads them to a starship-turned-mausoleum he conveniently recalls having been told about.

And so the plot does not so much develop as stagger from coincidence to coincidence. Orbitsville suffers increasingly violent fluctuations in gravity and illumination; green glowing lines segment its vast interior. Refurbishment of the starship is finished just in time to escape Orbitsville's break-up, and a literal *deus ex machina* delivers an explanation and puts everything back together again.

It's not that the explanation isn't ingenious, or that Shaw is not equal to the vision of Orbitsville's vastness. Just as he can neatly evoke the weltschmerz of Orbitsville's small, low-tech communities, so too he can rightly populate the vast territories of the structure itself, and picture the grandeur of its dissolution. But between the beginning and the end there is a sense that nothing in the plot leads anywhere in particular, and while the *deus ex machina* resolution is satisfyingly neat in a cosmological sense, it winds up too many loose threads in too short a space to feel like anything other than a download of information. In short, much of *Orbitsville Judgement* is an exercise in futility, undermined by its

authorial god. Beneath the lovingly textured surface, the book is hollow.

**I** am left with a few words to do justice to Garry Kilworth's *Dark Hills, Hollow Clocks* (Methuen, £8.95), a collection of brief confabulations written with a young audience in mind. To call them fairy stories is to risk evoking the fustian and the fey: but they are all glimpses of the faery, of the otherness of places from Hong Kong to the Orkneys, each as carefully and accurately wrought as a fine escapement, and every one an ornament to the storyteller's art.

(Paul J. McAuley)

Talking Fortitude,  
Dead Cities (and  
Sex, Sex, Sex)  
Gwyneth Jones

**B**limey. Don't sf writers think about anything else these days? And I thought it was just me...The first of these sex-mad texts, Storm Constantine's *Hermetech* (Headline, £14.95) is a decorative return to Wraethu territory, with more tech and more jobs for the girls. It's the indefinite near-future. A volte-face in favour of earth-cherishing values has failed. The cybernetic goddesses of neo-paganism will still counsel a lonely teenager by satellite link. But the bulk of earth's population is either dead or gone to orbit, the surface is a wasteland where nomads prowl between oases. Ari Famber is a fourteen-year-old trying to cope with a problem mother in one of the scrubbiest of these. One May-Eve a band of "natros," stylish renegades of the Tech-Green revolution, comes by. Ari learns (part of) the story of her own life, and is swept away to meet her tremendous destiny.

The blocking-in of recent history is brusque, but once this chore is over the fantasy unfolds engagingly. The story is a simple one of Gaia's last minute salvation. Ari's "father," legendary neuro-genetic genius, has attempted to create a living goddess: unlocking in Ari the vast elemental power of human sexuality, hinted at by millennia of Tantric doctrine but never yet unleashed. But there are blocks that must be removed. The planet-healing powersurge will burn Ari and her male partner to a crisp if it isn't handled correctly, and rip the cosmos to shreds besides. The nomad leader, Leila Saatchi, is another neuro-engineer. She identifies and rewires a suitable young *tabula rasa* to be the bridegroom: and a mythic journey, replete with picturesques, grotesques, and poisoned-earth elegy, continues

towards the Wicked City; where Leila seeks help in the midwiving of Ari's sexual birth.

Timescale and geography are hazy: some parts of this electro-magical landscape are more real than others. Ari's rotting suburban home beside the tech-enhanced stone circle – mournful in decay – has the taste and feel, the true dismal allure, of an urban wasteland twilight. The highly stylized Wicked City is slick and empty as a hit single: all permanent midnight alleys and spray-on shiny rain. It is here that the narrative begins to lose its drive. A subplot of famous poseurs with names like camp costume jewellery – *Zambia Crevecoeur*, *Jahsaxa Penumbra*, *Quincx Roirbak* – cannot conceal the fact that only one thing is due to happen in this story. The rather dim young bridegroom's going to get laid, and Reality is going to explode in a fountain of pastel dolphins. Ari's orgasm overwhelms the book.

Storm Constantine handles her cyber-goth jargon – and its loopy New Age applications – with great aplomb; and the characters, however recklessly named, are treated with respect. The US (chiefly) phenomenon of cyberpunk, of which *Hermetech* is a direct descendant, has always suffered from a marked distance between the stylist and the supposed constituents of the fictional world. The hands are the hands of wired-and-dangerous No Future kid. The voice is the voice of some clean-living baby boomer with a post-modernist imagination. (And the men are worse). Constantine has a chance of making the hybrid live, of fusing the lost kids and the smart circuitry. She seems to speak authentically from the future that is No Future: for a generation that already knows the worst of the damage, and gets the best fun out of the fancy toys that are left in the wreck. *Hermetech* is entertaining ephemera. Perhaps I'm asking for something Constantine doesn't intend to provide, but I wish she'd write something with more lasting bite.

The subplot in *Hermetech* is an outrageous sextavaganza involving a male prostitute who allows himself to be turned into a kind of erotic coffee-table, a parcel of orifices, convenient furniture for the orgy. But this humiliating ultrafeminization is eventually saved and validated: the talking furniture takes control of "hir" own life. Constantine's fictional transformation of male sexuality continues. Female nature is taken as a given, the male becomes a she-man: his gender identity enlarged and enhanced by the addition of the feminine. (See: "The She-Man" by Chris Straayer, Screen, 31: 3, Summer 90).

**G**ill Alderman, in *The Land Beyond* (Unwin Hyman, £13.95) is equally preoccupied with sexuality,



but this time the female is both given and problematic, while the male becomes the symbol of nature, of earthly cycles; of sensual pleasure. The world of *The Land Beyond* is that of Alderman's first novel *The Archivist*. There is nothing hazy about "Guna." There are no maps on the endpapers, instead there are city streets, shops where maps can be bought, libraries; universities. The novel is subtitled "a fable" but it is a very concrete fable. In this perfectly solid world, the primitive tribes of the far north (The Fishfolk) have fallen victim to civilization. The Sineinians, a somewhat humourless nation of technocrats with guilty consciences, have set up an artificial habitat where the survivors are watched over and encouraged to breed, in the hope that one day they may be returned to the wild.

This year, as the ice melts outside, the earthly and sensual tribal leader, Salter Bren, becomes determined to lead his people back into the real world. Blue – the Spring season – brings a more bizarre development, the arrival of a time-travelling circus led by another appealing male, Loy Sen. Alderman's fable asks the women of the artificial city of Traumesse, Fishfolk and Sineinians both, to decide between these two suitors.

In conscious irony the "natural" people are kept usefully occupied in processing and packing videocubes of the ultimate soap opera. The opera's creator, Ang Semo, is an artist trapped by her own success, an uneasy but expert administrator. Ang is the central character of the fable: the technocrat lover of nature, the warden who is as much a captive as her charges. The arrogance of the developed world's treatment of nature's children is driven home by Ang's secret personal misery. Powerfully attractive (or attractively powerful) to men and women both; problematically attracted in return, she cannot respond. She suffers from vaginismus – a double failure, since she longs for a child as well as a lover.

Ang's isolation is contrasted with the warm, rich life of the Fishfolk women. It appears irritatingly obvious that they will choose the harsh fulfilment of tradition and reject Sineinian bounty. But the fable is a little more subtle: there is the mysterious circus. The status of this phenomenon is never explained. If a time-travelling circus is an established feature of Alderman's alternate earth, we aren't informed of this in *The Land Beyond*. Inuit magic realism seems inevitable, and duly transpires. The paranormal setup of sawdust, clowns and chequered harlequin never sits completely easily: because one doesn't know exactly how weird this is supposed to be. But perhaps that's the intention. Obsessed with her sexual failure, Ang is unable

to respond rationally to clear signs that the project is completed. Instead she turns on Traumesse as if on her own cruelly closed body. When tragedy makes her Director she injects into her soap opera, and therefore into the whole integrated entity of Traumesse, an equation which will force the system into Chaos.

Chaos mathematics is the sf topic of the moment, liable to stamp a book clearly with its year of origin: but so what – it provides an apposite expansion to the nature or technology? dilemma. "Chaos," not the formless abyss but the inescapable matrix in which order – from time to time – arises, is represented by the circus, tightrope-balanced on the edge of reality, disciplined disorder. Alderman seems to offer it as the true solution, the choice of the brave. Yet Ang's equation will still destroy Traumesse: and the Fishfolk, escaping from their cage, must return to the captivity of tradition or the arctic will kill them (it will kill them anyway). We humans cannot bear very much reality. And, rightly, Ang Semo remains: consoled but not healed. Her condition is the condition of civilization – to love the world, but through glass.

The fable is only the framework. This is a leisured, crowded narrative full of the snow-light, chill and frowst of the lovely and comfortless north land. Gill Alderman's female-ordered society is a subtle and complex creation. The meaning of sexual failure for a woman, in a woman's world, is explored without a trace of crass role-reversal. Yet *The Land Beyond* and *Hermitech* might both (to mirror John Clute's remarks in *IZ* 41) be called "male" books, in that they're both concerned with a single and explosive event, that comes off or doesn't but in either case is completely central to the action.

**P**hillip Mann's *Wulfsyarn* (Gollancz, £13.95) is another "male" book, but here the protagonist's gender identity is treated in isolation. Sexual excitement is clinically demoted, an entry on the chart at the end of the bed. The Gentle Order of St Francis Dionysos, distant descendant of the Franciscans, is engaged in rescuing and treating casualties of a devastating pan-galactic war. The war seems to have been between factions of humanity, but many of the victims are very alien indeed. A fantastic new hospital starship, providing for every possible giant or bizarre patient, is commissioned. Jon Wilberfoss is chosen as its symbiotic captain. This is an extraordinary responsibility, for the Nightingale's navigation, life support, medical systems will be totally dependant on the mind of this one man. Wilberfoss manages to wreck the whole venture on his maiden voyage and – worst of

all – himself survives and returns. *Wulfsyarn* is the story of his debriefing: his confession and absolution, I would say; if this book actually had much to do with the beliefs it borrows.

This is a tremendous old-fashioned sf yarn, in the rich portentous style of Gene Wolfe's *Urth of the New Sun*: with sky-filling starships and theological subtext. The device of the "auto-scribe" narrator did not seem to me extraordinary: but the interludes in which this ensouled writing-desk tells "his" own story are as strong, if not stronger, than the Wilberfoss narrative; and offer a welcome relief. The tragic story itself is one of unrelieved stupidity. It is hard to believe that these spacefaring *médecins sans frontières* would have considered a project like the Nightingale; or the designers failed to insert any safeguards in their loony patriarchal machine. Moreover, Mr Mann is not as adept as Conrad at describing a sequence of events and decisions at once plausible and utterly disastrous. This Lord Jim gets into his abysmal mess only by fighting through a great deal of authorial handwaving.

But like *The Land Beyond* (though Mann doesn't announce the fact) this is a fable. Jon Wilberfoss – willpower given by God – represents Everyman, and Phillip Mann uses his tragedy to explore the tragedy of male (most specifically male, not human) power, hubris, and helpless propensity for destruction.

Wilberfoss returns to the gentle planet Tallin, and a long struggle commences. The gentle Tallin bears a strong resemblance to Mr Mann's adopted New Zealand; some of the implied assumptions about Maori versus Northern European culture are a little disturbing. And Mann's rich and soothing writing doesn't quite conceal a deeply self-centred and pessimistic judgement. Wilberfoss must become the Green Man, regress from civilization and consciousness until he is one with the earth: only then will he be at peace. The whole enterprise of patriarchy is useless, and nothing can be done to repair it. Wilberfoss, by repenting of his own existence, is saved the trouble of making any reparations. A long way after the choice of Francis of Assisi, of concrete amends and intellectual joy, there is no solution for this Fallen Man but to wallow in guilt, daub mud in his hair; and drop dead. Well, *Wulfsyarn* is not my story, so maybe I shouldn't comment: but as a solution to your problems, boys, this does not strike me as helpful.

**I**wish I could be more positive about *The Broken Wheel* (NEL, £14.95 hb; £8.95 pb), the second volume in David Wingrove's massive Chung Kuo series. This project has been savaged too often, on the ridiculous grounds that the publisher's hype is somewhat



hyperbolic. Alas, the writing here is surprisingly poor, even for a frankly commercial epic. The action consists of dead-as-dust political machinations, interrupted by dollops of goey and lifeless soft porn. The female characters think like doormats and get treated like dirt, the males are scarcely more positively handled; and in this "Chinese" world, the Chinese are relegated to a mediaeval costume drama on the sidelines. It seems as if Mr Wingrove has taken the great Chinese lesson too much to heart. The misery of forty billion people is really a pretty meaningless concept. How true! And what are we all here for, anyway. In short, *The Broken Wheel* wouldn't be worthy of comment if its author wasn't an established critic of the genre. An eight-volume novel can't be judged on one book. But the verdict for now must be: could do much better.

(Gwyneth Jones)

## Silk and Swashbuckle Wendy Bradley

Costume drama this month. First a gem, Michael Scott Rohan's *Chase the Morning* (Orbit, £4.99). It begins in the present day when an Armani-suited and cold-hearted yuppie turns a corner and walks into romance and adventure. This world is the Core, where time passes slowly and sedately and people see what they expect to see – but around any corner you may come to the Rim, where "shadows" of good and evil remain. He finds a dock where sailing ships still wait at anchor, and Jyp, a sea captain, and Mall, a swordsmistress, befriend him. He sails with them down the clouds east of the sun in pursuit of semi-human "wolves" who have kidnapped the person to whom he is closest, his secretary Clare. Along the way they land in New Orleans and he is sucked back into the Core, finding himself, leather-clad and sword-wielding, having to do some very sharp thinking in the face of some unromantic cops. The ending is, for everyone save the hapless Clare who is nothing more than a plot token, as satisfactory as you could wish. Computer programmes as magic spells, some voodoo hoodoo straight out of a Bond movie, laughing demigods and heroes out of every kind of mythology: a rich, satisfying brew.

Then there is Peter Morwood's *Prince Ivan* (Legend £12.99) which is set in "Old Mother Russia." Ivan is a Tsarevich who is required to find a bride and, after his sisters go

through the ritual process of pairing off with a trio of magicians, goes off questing to find a princess of his own. The brothers-in-law point him in the direction of Mar'ya Morevna, a suitably beautiful Princess who also leads her own armies, performs her own magic and is a general all-round competent gal. They meet and, with the inevitability of all fairy tales, fall in love and marry. But the traditional fairy tale plot gets a twist at this point. It is Ivan who is dumb enough to go wandering around strange palaces and opening locked doors about which he has received Mysterious Warnings, and he releases Koshchey the Undying, a fearsome necromancer, and then has to spend the rest of the book putting to rights what he has messed up.

The interesting feature is that, although much of the book has the flat heraldic colours of a fairy tale – good is good and bad is bad and there are no shades of grey – nevertheless Ivan himself is a rounded character and this is an interesting attempt to make us identify with someone flogging his way round all that tedious "rule of three" stuff that you always have to go through in this kind of story. You can see where the plot is going but it is interesting to get there.

What are we to do about Weiss and Hickman? Just as you get used to their trademarks – a well designed universe that ticks along like a Swiss watch, a neat plot to oil it along, spoiled only by the cardboard characters which are its working parts – suddenly they change the design and confound you. *The Prophet of Akhran* (Bantam, £4.50), the third volume of the *Rose of the Prophet* trilogy, has characters who may be die-stamped to resemble hundreds of others but nevertheless ring genuine metal, not cardboard: it is the plot that has a broken spring.

It is clear that the fiery hero and heroine, Khardan and Zohra, both care deeply about the young mage Matthew, and it is openly stated that Matthew has the hots for both of them and there was a moment when I thought we were going to stray into a corner of *Dhalgren* territory and get an X-certificate happy ending. However Weiss and Hickman, clearly exhausted by the creative effort of giving birth to some characters one can finally care about, let Matthew settle for hero worship, Khardan and Zohra sink into a passionate embrace and the plot give up the ghost entirely.

Doris Egan's *The Gate of Ivory* (Mandarin, £3.99) follows a woman scholar stranded on the planet Ivory, the one place where magic works, and caught up in the local aristocracy's battles. She is a likeable character, and I always prefer a heroine

who gets on with it rather than sitting around waiting for someone else to rescue her. There are a couple of loose ends in the plot that bother me slightly and a few bits of magic impedimenta that don't even get used, just carried around a lot, but on the whole if the "A spellbound world" slogan on the front cover means there are more to come I will be well enough pleased.

Finally there is *Silk Roads and Shadows* by Susan Shwartz (Pan, £3.99) which is the story of Alexandra of Byzantium, sister of a ninth-century Emperor, and her travels along the silk road into China to steal silkworms. She is pursued by magic and at the centre of various strands of magical contests, and herself treads the "diamond path" of enlightenment. Curiously underwritten, the novel reads like the first draft of a Mary Renault crossed with a pretty ordinary sword and sorcery. However I read it on a train and was sufficiently engrossed to miss my station.

(Wendy Bradley)

## Floppy Discworld Jones & McIntosh

These days, if a new anthology doesn't have a brand name (such as *Other Edens* or *Zenith*) then a theme is a useful selling point. A year or so ago, there was the heavy-breathing Arrows of Eros with "sex" and now we have *Digital Dreams* (New English Library, £4.50) edited by David V. Barrett with "computers." Presumably someone up at NEL didn't think the subject would be enough to turn the punters on all by itself – so, prominently displayed on the front cover, is "Exciting new stories by Terry Pratchett and the best of British science fiction." In fact there's only one story by this Really Big Name – admittedly rather a good one – and the other nineteen come from writers, established and otherwise, who presumably qualify as the "best-of-British" contingent.

For example, there's Diana Wynne-Jones, with the "Nad and Dan adn Quaffy" – all about a lady sf writer, stoked up on coffee, boldly piloting her word processor where no computer has gone before. Then Josephine Saxton's "The Great Brain Legend" ploughs the old after-the-fall furrow but turns up nothing new, while beneath the somewhat overwrought prose of Anne Gay's "The World of the Silver Writer" is a good feminist story struggling to get out – but why is the otherwise unmysterious man in the story called Arlvad and not, say, Malcolm? Then there's the story that closes the collection, "Speaking in Tongues," an inexplicable loss of form for Ian



McDonald, which for all its smooth writing is more a succession of disconnected tracts than a story. The shortest story here, "Virus" by Neil Gaiman, couched in the form of a poem, is very effective considering its brevity – and the longest, John Grant's "The Machine It Was That Cried," is particularly worth a mention. It's a space story, the only real one in the collection, with characters you care about on a one-way journey to the stars.

There are also quite a number of new writers represented here, most of whom deliver worthwhile stories, although some do show their rough edges. "The Reconstruction of Min-gus" by Phil Manchester has potential in its idea of software simulations of the jazz greats, but the story just isn't well enough put together to make it work. By contrast, Michael Fearn's "Twister of Words" is more successful as a story, but its theme of society breaking down simply isn't given enough freshness. Then Paul Beardsley's "The Coleridge Bombers" works well enough to promise good things for the future, although the heavy, dream-laden imagery comes very close to toppling it into obscurity – and "Dependant" by editor David V. Barratt lacks a real sf element but is otherwise a satisfying, smoothly-written piece about an amoral computer nerd.

Several of these new writers opted for humour. Andy Sawyer's "The Mechanical Art" has a computer salesman with a prose-writing package arriving in the understandably incredulous world of Shakespearean London – it's well observed, and moves along nicely, but doesn't deliver a strong enough denouement to make it more than a diversion. "The Lord of the Files" by Ray Girvan and Steve Jones playfully stirs black magic into the computer brew and raises more than a few (intended) smiles. And finally, best of this new bunch, there's "Digital Cats Come Out at Night" by Ben Jeapes, which rather engagingly visualizes software viruses as animals in a digitized game of cat and mouse – it's jaunty, original and amusing.

Two of the established authors also make attempts at humour – but with much less success. Alex Stewart's "Forgotten Milestones in Computing No. 7: The Quenderghast Bullian Algebraic Calculator," not quite forgotten enough, is one of those relentlessly "funny" stories that's about as likely to make you augh as the thought of filling in a VAT return. Then, presumably intended as a wry and witty allegory but about as daft as the title would suggest is Garry Kilworth's "Bronze Casket for a Mummified Shrew-Mouse." This is about divinity, computer viruses, near-death experiences and Maurice the maniacal shrew – and was unwisely chosen to lead off the anthology.

Surprisingly, Terry Pratchett's inexplicably titled "#ifdefDEBUG + 'world/enough' + 'time'," is not basically a funny story (although it does have a sprinkling of good one-liners). Instead it's a tightly written murder mystery set in a future where virtual reality has almost supplanted real life – and it's the closest thing the collection can offer to a Gibsonian Matrix/cyberpunk story. It's also one of the best of a distinct group of stories in the book – a sub-set that might be defined as "the British establishment computer story." The Paul Beardsley falls into this category, as does "Measured Perspective" by Keith Roberts, "What Happened at Cambridge IV" by David Langford, "Where He Went" by Paul Kincaid, and (despite being set both far-future and off-planet) "Last Came Assimilation" by Storm Constantine. All suggest the lives of individuals being manipulated by the shadowy hand of the establishment – something which gives them a curiously old-fashioned edge. For all that, the Constantine gives us a well-visualized picture of a heroine assimilated into a computer-generated world and the Keith Roberts is a quite acceptable tale of jealousy and revenge. But one of the best – and certainly the archetypal story – in this group is the Langford (a prequel, incidentally, to "Blit" from *IZ* 26) which sustains a brooding air of suppressed menace in a covert research facility. This is a feel the Kincaid might have matched if it hadn't been presented as a straight transcript without benefit of the speakers' names – a device which is both irritating and pointless.

Any theme anthology runs the risk of grouping so many similar stories together that they blur together in the reader's mind – something that *Digital Dreams* just about manages to avoid, mainly due to the refreshing way many of the stories haven't taken themselves too seriously. Overall, although this is a collection that is likely to confirm rather than change the way you feel about computers, you do get a lot of very readable stories (one of them by somebody called Terry Pratchett) – and that, at a cover price of £4.50, seems like fair value to us.

(Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

## Bright Future – Faulty K?

### Peter T. Garratt

Contrary to the expectation of cynics that *Interzone* editor David Pringle would fill the magazine's review pages with mention of novels

pulled from under his other hat as series editor at Games Workshop Books, there has in fact been a dearth of reviews of GW material in *IZ*. (John Clute praised Jack Yeovil's *Drachenfels* in issue 35, and Wendy Bradley made brief mention of the anthology *Route 666* in issue 42).

This is a pity, as the standard of the fiction has been high, though not without leaving room for controversy. The early Warhammer Fantasy titles were well received by those who read them, though idiosyncratic cover design may have affected their general visibility. The last two, *Plague Daemon* by Brian (Stableford) Craig and the anthology *Red Thirst* ed. D. Pringle (all titles quoted here are published by GW Books at £4.99), appeared in the spring of 1990 and received surprisingly little attention considering that they are intelligent, well-crafted modern fantasies. This reflects the background prescribed by Games Workshop for their fantasy game-world – well put together, if not always original: full of the otherworldly, yet grittier than most similar stuff.

Books are now out in two other GW series, the first of which is based on the game "Dark Future." *Demon Download* by Jack Yeovil is set in a near-future, alternate-reality America where things are even worse than they are now, in terms of eco-collapse, dominance by large corporations and criminal bodies, political extremism and general lawlessness. Yeovil has had fun with the background, which works well as satire. The book has left its game-roots far behind, and stands by itself as the best comic/action cyberpunk novel for years. As well as lots of well-realized action, there is tremendous zest and humour. Yeovil (aka Kim Newman) has cross-linked the Dark Future world with Warhammer Fantasy: a revivalist group allowed by President Ollie North to reclaim desert land is in fact in the business of raising demons, which can download into computers. The chief demon sets about its work of mayhem with great gusto, boogying and singing "Wooly Bully" as it runs riot. The author is said to spend far less time on his writing as Yeovil than as Newman: yet as an inheritor of the pulp tradition, he does best as Yeovil. Recommended.

I have more mixed feelings about the background of the latest GW series: "Warhammer 40,000" (familarly known as "40K"). Here the ingredients of the fantasy series are transferred, thinly disguised, to the far future: a decaying Empire is menaced by assorted monsters and daemons. Whereas in the mediaeval fantasies the Emperor is a cipher and his followers very mixed in their attitudes, this is from an adult viewpoint an inferior scenario, with a semi-divine Emperor



who is simultaneously autocratic, benevolent, and slightly mad. His troops are expected to be totally committed and utterly ruthless, because the enemies are even worse.

Not surprisingly, some of GW's favourite writers have been reluctant to try and make much of this. Those who have, in the anthology *Deathwing* (eds. D. Pringle & Neil Jones), have made a fairly good job of it. They seem to manage by allowing their characters more room for doubt about the grim regime they serve than would be the norm there. (Neil McIntosh has entitled his story "Seed of Doubt.") Even in the title story, co-authored by William King and Bryan Ansell from within the GW Design Studio, the heroes are less ruthless than their standing orders require. Despite this, real questions of authority do not occur, nor are the villains given redeeming features to undermine their status as lasercannon fodder. This leaves the stories lopsided; glorious technogoth settings are marred by a morality which leapfrogs back over the heyday of space opera to the time of BEMs and ray-guns.

The best *Deathwing* stories are by Ian Watson, and he continues the good work in the first 40K novel, *Inquisitor*. Here seeds of doubt are permitted to become saplings, allowing for a much more convincing portrayal of a desperately flawed society which has to be defended for fear of even worse. Not many writers could involve us in the fate of an Inquisitor hero and a Courtesan/Assassin heroine (who turns at times into the simulacrum of a sort of giant alien insect). The superb way Watson has used this unpromising material could well lead to the novel being rated close to his best. Watson is the Jack Yeovil of the far future.

(Peter T. Garratt)

## A Patchwork

In the middle of the curious patchwork which is *Close Encounters? Science and Science Fiction* by Robert Lambourne, Michael Shallis & Michael Shortland (Adam Hilger, £12.95) there is an intelligent, detailed and well-written essay on the image of the scientist in sf movies. It is followed by two shorter but reasonably well-executed essays on religious imagery in sf movies and ecological mysticism in sf movies. These chapters – which, if I have taken the correct inference from the biographical notes on the back cover, are all by the historian and philosopher of science Michael Shortland – make up pp.71-167 of the book. I am completely at a loss to understand why they are prefaced by three chapters

by two physicists (one of whom is almost incapable of expressing himself clearly) whose only function is to mount a ludicrously feeble pretence that the book is a general survey of the uses of scientific ideas in science fiction.

The first of the three prefatory chapters is a potted history of sf which deals languorously with the myth of Daedalus and John Kepler but condemns all the writers to have emerged since 1960 to a bare mention; the second and third offer ham-fisted accounts of a series of notions from physical science, with lists of sf stories (only a few of which are described in any detail) which use or refer to them. I do not know whether the publisher or the authors were responsible for the decision to pad the book out in this way, but it seems to me to have been a stupid move, which has succeeded in producing a blatantly dishonest exercise in packaging that contrives to hide from view the actual nature of its most useful and meritorious contents.

Readers who are interested in the way in which written sf makes use of scientific ideas should avoid this book like the plague (they might try instead to track down *The Science in Science Fiction*, edited by Peter Nicholls) but anyone interested in the sociology of filmic representations of scientists and science will certainly find it rewarding, if only they can get through (or skip over) the first seventy pages.

(Brian Stableford)

UK Books Received  
November 1990

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Andrews, Virginia. *Web of Dreams*. "Her spellbinding new superseller." Collins/Fontana, ISBN 0-00-617898-7, 416pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Romantic/supernatural novel, first published in the USA, 1990; it completes the "bestselling Casteel-Tatterton saga: *Heaven*, *Dark Angel*, *Fallen Hearts* and *Gates of Paradise*"; since the author, known in her native United States as "V.C. Andrews," died in 1986, one has to assume that these books have been written, or at any rate completed, by someone else [probably Andrew Neiderman, though his name isn't mentioned anywhere on this volume].) 29th November.

Anthony, Piers. *Heaven Cent*. "Sequel to *Vale of the Vole* in the latest Xanth trilogy." Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-53719-6, 324pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 6th December.

Armist, Lucie, ed. *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction*. Routledge, ISBN 0-415-04448-0, 234pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Essay collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; the all-female contributors include Gwyneth Jones, Sarah Lefanu, Moira Montieth, Josephine Saxton, Sue Thomas and Lisa Tuttle; at least four of the critics just mentioned are subscribers to *Interzone*, but the only mention of the magazine occurs in the interesting essay by Nickianne Moody on "Maeve and Guinevere," where Moody appears to be taking Lee Montgomerie gently to task for her slightly unkind comments in *IZ* 25 on Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*.) 22nd November.

Austin, Richard. *The Guardians: Armageddon Run*. "The fifth adventure in the blistering new series." Pan, ISBN 0-330-31662-1, 182pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986; the author is pseudonymous.) 7th December.

Austin, Richard. *The Guardians: War Zone*. "The sixth adventure..." Pan, ISBN 0-330-31663-X, 217pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) 7th December.

Bova, Ben. *As on a Darkling Plain*. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0556-8, 189pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1975; it has yet another of those Matthew Arnold/"Dover Beach" titles, like "Clash by Night" [Kuttner & Moore], "Ignorant Armies" [Jack Yeovil] or the novel *Dover Beach* [Richard Bowker] – could this be the sf writers' favourite poem?) 6th December.

Bova, Ben, ed. *The Best of the Nebulas*. Hale, ISBN 0-7090-4258-2, 573pp, hardcover, £15.95. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1989; contains Nebula Award-winning short fiction from the years 1965 to 1980; according to Bova's extremely brief introduction, it's supposed to go up to 1985, which suggests to us that this British edition of the anthology may have been truncated: the publishers keep us in the dark.) 30th November.

Brooke, Keith. *Keepers of the Peace*. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04907-3, 216pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the debut novel of a young British writer [born 1966] who has published several stories in *Interzone*.) 22nd November.

Brosnan, John. *War of the Sky Lords*. "Second volume of the Sky Lords trilogy." Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04555-8, 252pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1989.) 22nd November.

Budrys, Algis, ed. *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future, Volume IV*. New Era, ISBN 1-870451-24-4, 425pp, paperback, £3.95. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1988; contains 16 stories by finalists in the ongoing "Writers of the Future" competition, plus non-fiction contributions from Ramsey Campbell, Orson Scott Card, Tim Powers and others.) 22nd November.

Cabal, Ciruelo. *Ciruelo*. Text by Nigel Suckling. *Dragon's World/Paper Tiger*, ISBN 1-85028-130-0, 128pp, trade paperback, £9.95. (Collection of sf/fantasy paintings, first edition; the artist was born in Argentina and now lives in Spain; many of his pictures are markedly erotic; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 29th November.

Chalker, Jack L. *When the Changewinds Blow: Book 1 of Changewinds*. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-53714-5, 293pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 3rd January.

Clarke, Arthur C. *Childhood's End*. Revised



edition. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31661-3, 200pp, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1953; the revisions consist of a rewritten first chapter and a four-page foreword: "From Chapter Two onwards, *Childhood's End* remains exactly as in 1953"; since he has revised the short first chapter mainly in order to do away with the Cold War references, it seems a pity Clarke hasn't taken this opportunity to pay a tribute to Mikhail Gorbachev [a politician who could, in a sense, have been invented by Clarke himself]; there's a mention of George Bush in the foreword, but Gorbey doesn't get a look in; what a shame.) 7th December.

De Lint, Charles. **Philip José Farmer's The Dungeon, Book 3: The Valley of Thunder.** "A Byron Preiss Book." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40176-9, 263pp, paperback, £3.50. (Shared-world sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989; this is actually the American edition with a UK price-and-ISBN sticker attached; Charles de Lint's name does not appear on the front cover or spine.) 16th November.

Duane, Diane. **The Door Into Fire.** "Volume One of the epic *Tale of the Five*." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13661-1, 332pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1979.) 15th January.

Eddings, David. **Sorceress of Darshiva: Book Four of The Malloreon.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13020-6, 396pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) 7th December.

Farris, John. **The Axeman Cometh.** Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-53717-X, 269pp, paperback, £3.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1989; unlike UK the hardcover edition of last year, this reprint has been set in large print to make it appear longer: it's really quite a short novel.) 3rd January.

Feist, Raymond E. **Prince of the Blood.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-07140-7, 396pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989; see Brian Stableford's article on Feist, in *Interzone* 39, for comment.) 6th December.

Gemmell, David A. **Lion of Macedon.** Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-3477-0, 419pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; it's described as "the first volume of an epic...set in the glory days of Ancient Greece"; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 14th March.

Harrison, Mark. **Mark Harrison's Dreamlands.** Text by Lisa Tuttle. Dragon's World/Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85028-132-7, 128pp, trade paperback, £9.95. (Collection of sf/fantasy cover art, first edition; Harrison has done some gorgeous work [including the painting we used on the cover of *Interzone* 33] and, with luck, this all-colour volume should make him better known; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 13th December.

Henshall, David. **Starchild and Witchfire.** "Firefly Plus." Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-53351-8, 231pp, paperback, £4.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; it's a debut book by a new British writer.) 23rd November.

Hodgson, William Hope. **The Night Land.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20933-6, 509pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1912; this appears to be the full text, not the abridged edition which has previously appeared in paperback.) 29th November.

Hutson, Sean. **Nemesis.** Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0789-4, 349pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1989; not to be confused with the recent Isaac Asimov sf novel of the same title.) 17th January.

Hutson, Sean. **Renegades.** Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-19536-8, 336pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; it says "Copyright 1990" inside, but there's no indication of prior American publication, and the author is British.) 17th January.

Jeter, K. W. **Soul Eater.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-31682-6, 314pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1983; selected by David Pringle for mention in *Modern Fantasy: The Hundred Best Novels* [1988], and now appearing in the UK for the first time.) 7th December.

Jones, Neil, and David Pringle, eds. **Deathwing.** "Warhammer 40,000." Illustrated by John Blanche, Paul Bonner and others. GW Books, ISBN 1-872372-12-0, 257pp, paperback, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf anthology, first edition; contributors include Storm Constantine, William King, Charles Stross and Ian Watson; two of the stories are prequels to Ian Watson's novel *Inquisitor*; although Neil Jones is given precedence as editor on the title page, his name does not appear on cover or spine.) November.

Kirchoff, Mary, and Douglas Niles. **Flint the King.** "Dragonlance Saga Preludes II, Volume Two." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-014369-6, 308pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 6th December.

Koontz, Dean R. **Shattered.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0299-0, 245pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1973; it originally appeared under the pseudonym "K. R. Dwyer" and has already been reissued by Headline in a UK paperback edition.) 8th November.

Koontz, Dean R. **Whispers.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0297-4, 444pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1980; it has already been reissued by Headline in a 1990 paperback edition.) 6th December.

Kurtz, Katherine. **The Harrowing of Gwynedd: Volume 1 of The Heirs of Saint Camber.** Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-971070-6, 384pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) 6th December.

Kushner, Ellen. **Thomas the Rhymer.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05005-5, 251pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; proof copy received.) 7th February.

Lee, Tanith. **Kill the Dead.** Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-966360-0, 172pp, paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1980.) 6th December.

McAllister, Angus. **The Canongate Strangler.** Dog & Bone [175 Queen Victoria Drive, Glasgow G14 9BP], ISBN 1-872536-10-7, 204pp, £5. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; the author has previously written such sf novels as *The Krugg Syndrome*.) 13th November.

McAuley, Paul J. **The King of the Hill and Other Stories.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05001-2, 216pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; McAuley's first collection; contains eight stories, four of which first appeared in *Interzone*; recommended.) 7th March.

McDonald, Ian. **Desolation Road.** Drunken Dragon Press [84 Suffolk St., Birmingham B1 1TA], ISBN 0-947578-02-1, 373pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988; there is a simultaneous "De Luxe" edition, signed by the author [not seen]; this is the first world hardcover edition of a debut novel by a rising British star.) 22nd November.

Miller, Walter M., Jr. **A Canticale for Leibowitz.** Macdonald/Orbit, ISBN 0-356-19131-1, 356pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1960 [it says "1959" inside the book, but we believe that's incorrect]; one of the all-time sf classics, reissued in UK hardcover in anticipation of its genuinely "long-awaited" sequel - which is promised for next year, all being well.) 30th November.

Morghen, Filippo. **Life on the Moon in 1768: Ten Fantasy Engravings of the 18th Century.** Introduction by Brian W. Aldiss. Harry Margary [Lympne Castle, Hythe, Kent], ISBN 0-903541-43-2, unpaginated [24pp], trade paperback, £21 [plus £1.70 p&p]. (Collection of nine large engravings originally made in the 1760s by this possibly Dutch-born artist resident in Italy; the illustrations give us impressions of life on the moon, which seems to have been a watery and verdant place in Morghen's imagination; first edition; an intriguing oddity.) November?

Neiderman, Andrew. **The Devil's Advocate.** Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-3834-2, 313pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 13th December.

Nimmo, Jenny. **The Chestnut Soldier.** "Part 3 of The Snow Spider trilogy." Mandarin/Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-0150-1, 168pp, paperback, £2.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1989.) Late entry: 8th October publication, received by us in November.

Nimmo, Jenny. **Emlyn's Moon.** "Now a major TV series." Mandarin/Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-0703-8, 158pp, paperback, £2.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1987; the second volume in *The Snow Spider* trilogy.) Late entry: 8th October publication, received by us in November.

Plowright, Teresa. **Dreams of an Unseen Planet.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20932-8, 348pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in Canada [?], 1986; a first novel by a Canadian writer.) 29th November.

Pohl, Frederik. **Pohlstars.** Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04855-7, 203pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1984.) 22nd November.

Rankin, Robert. **Armageddon: The Musical.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13681-6, 331pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in 1990; he's been writing for some years, but this is the first of Rankin's books we've ever been sent for review; it seems that Corgi are now intent on boosting him as another Adams or Pratchett; proof copy received.) 25th April.

Salvatore, R. A. **Homeland.** "Forgotten Realms. Book One, The Dark Elf Trilogy." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-014372-6, 314pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 6th December.

Simak, Clifford D. **Enchanted Pilgrimage.** Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0078-7, 218pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1976.) 6th December.

Simmons, Dan. **Summer of Night.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0370-9, 473pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1991; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; proof copy received.) 11th February.

Stableford, Brian, ed. **The Dedalus Book of Decadence (Moral Ruins).** Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-63-4, 283pp, paperback, £7.99. (Anthology of fantastic poetry and tales; first edition; Stableford's introduction fills nearly one third of the book, and many of the translations from the French are his; the French and English contributors selected range from Charles Baudelaire to James Elroy Flecker.) 6th December.



Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **Frank Herbert: A Voice from the Desert – A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 36." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-27-0, 48pp, paperback, £2. (Author bibliography, first edition.) November.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **Piers Anthony: Biblio of an Ogre – A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 35." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-23-8, 45pp, paperback, £2. (Author bibliography, first edition.) Late entry: September publication, received in November.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. **Fritz Leiber: Sardonic Swordsman – A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 22." 2nd edition. Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-24-6, 90pp, paperback, £3.75. (Author bibliography; the first edition appeared in 1987.) Late entry: October publication, received in November.

Stewart, R. J. **Celtic Gods, Celtic Goddesses.** Illustrated by Miranda Gray and Courtney Davis. Cassell/Blandford, ISBN 0-7137-2108-1, 160pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Study of Celtic myth, first edition; an attractively illustrated gift book.) 1st November.

Wilhelm, Kate. **Children of the Wind: Five Novellas.** Hale, ISBN 0-7090-4215-9, 263pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1989.) 30th November.

Wolfe, Gene. **Castleview.** New English Library, ISBN 0-450-53850-8, 279pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 3rd January.

## Overseas Books Received

Campbell, John W. **The Moon is Hell!** "Masters of Science Fiction." Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-88184-674-0, 256pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1951; contains two novellas: the title piece and "The Elder Gods.") 15th December.

Chandler, A. Bertram. **From Sea to Shining Star.** Edited by Keith Curtis and Susan Chandler. Illustrated by Nick Stathopoulos. Dreamstone [PO Box 312, Fyshwick, ACT 2609, Australia], ISBN 0-958768-1-5, 342pp, hardcover, A\$70. (Sf collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous "Collectors' Edition" priced at A\$100 [not seen]; this is a handsomely produced volume of about 30 stories drawn from an almost 40-year timespan [Chandler, who was born in England in 1912 and emigrated to Australia in 1956, died in 1984].) Late entry: 21st October publication, received in November.

Haining, Peter, ed. **Weird Tales: A selection, in facsimile, of the best from the world's most famous fantasy magazine.** Carroll & Graf, ISBN 1-88184-631-7, 264pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first published in the UK, 1976; contains stories by Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, August Derleth, Edmond Hamilton, Robert E. Howard, H. P. Lovecraft, Seabury Quinn, Clark Ashton Smith, Theodore Sturgeon, etc.; this is the "revised edition," issued by Xanadu in the UK in October 1990.) 15th December.

[Jones, Stephen, ed.] **Fantasy Tales.** "Issue No. 2, Fall 1990" [i.e. issue 5 according to the UK numbering]. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-88184-643-0, 202pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology-cum-paperback magazine; first published in the UK, 1990.) December?

Knight, Damon. **A Reasonable World.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85077-8, 273 pp, hardcover,

\$17.95. (Sf novel, first edition; sequel to CV and *The Observers*; proof copy received.) 1st February.

Niven, Larry, and Steven Barnes. **Achilles' Choice.** Illustrated by Boris Vallejo. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85099-9, 216pp, hardcover, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first edition; it's Niven's fifth collaboration with Barnes; when you subtract the pages devoted to the Vallejo drawings and make allowance for the large print, it's really quite short; so this is probably the "cyberjock novella" which Niven referred to in the interview in *Interzone* 39.) March.

Roberts, Keith. **Anita.** Illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian. Owlswick Press [PO Box 8243, Philadelphia, PA 19101-8243, USA], ISBN 0-913896-27-6, 195pp, hardcover, \$20.25. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1970; this fine new edition includes a new author's introduction and an additional story, "The Checkout"; a publisher's note informs us that it is available to UK readers for £12.) November.

Saberhagen, Fred. **The Sixth Book of Lost Swords: Mindsword's Story.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85128-6, 250pp, hardcover, \$16.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) December.

Van Vogt, A. E. **Cosmic Encounter.** "Masters of Science Fiction." Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-88184-677-5, 254pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1980.) 15th December.

Watson, Andy, and Mark V. Ziesing, eds. **Journal Wired: A Semi-Annual.** Summer/Fall '90. Watson/Ziesing [PO Box 76, Shingletown, CA 96088, USA], ISBN 0-929480-56-2, 353pp, trade paperback, \$15. (Sf/fantasy anthology-cum-paperback-magazine, first edition; this is the third issue, and it's much larger than the previous two; contributors include Colin Greenland, Patrick McGrath, Lucius Shepard, Allen Steele, etc.; there are also interviews with William Burroughs, William Gibson and others.) November?

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